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IMAGE: BEN WELLER

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CLASSIC ITALY

San Domenico Basilica, Asinelli Tower and the rooftops of Bologna, Italy
Image: AWL Images

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Jini Reddy

Any lover of the natural world will find it impossible not to fall for Punkaharju, where Finns come to rest and recharge. I never thought I'd be the sort to leap out of a sauna and take a dip in ice-cold lake waters, but when in Finland... **PUNKAHARJU P.46**

Julia Buckley

Italy can be exhausting because it's one big-hitter after another — and the biggest-hitters of all are usually packed. Living in Venice, I've learned that escaping the crowds is the best way to see the country. After all, there are iconic sights everywhere. **ITALY P.68**

Sarah Marshall

I last visited Madagascar a decade ago, but despite the challenges it continues to face, I was relieved to find it's still like no other place on earth. It's not a straightforward destination to visit, but for those who do, the rewards are many. **MADAGASCAR P.100**

Oliver Smith

I've sampled plenty of single malt whisky over the years, so it was wonderful to canoe down the Spey — the river at the heart of whisky country, from whose tributaries many distilleries take their water. It even tastes great when you capsize. **SCOTLAND P.112**

Zane Henry

It's always surreal visiting my hometown and seeing how much and how little has changed. The blockbuster natural scenery was still there, but I was thrilled to see Cape Town is shaking off the funk of the pandemic with new restaurants and bars. **CAPE TOWN P.150**

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National Geographic Traveller (UK) is published by APL Media Limited, Unit 310, Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL
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Editor's letter

ISSUE 112, MAY 2023

On my first visit to Italy, I headed high into the Apennine Mountains of Abruzzo, taking in several medieval villages, where, almost every night, each local restaurant would deliver the same local speciality — *spaghetti alla chitarra* — to our table with obvious pride.

You could say it was a surprise the second time it was served, but by the fourth I was even more delighted — enjoying the subtle differences in flavour and technique, but even more so the convivial reception and dedication to perfection. Proof, if it was needed, that Italy's allure can't be separated into food or culture or history — it comes as a whole package.

Having topped the short-haul category of our Reader Awards for four years in a row, it's a destination that clearly resonates with you — a perennial favourite with a nation of travellers known for their desire to escape to warmer climes, not to mention a borderline obsession with pasta, pizza and gelato.

Therefore, surely, Italy needs no introduction. Or does it? Maybe you've seen Rome's ancient ruins, explored Tuscany's hilltop villages and got lost in Venice's backstreets. But what of its other essential attractions?

From train journeys through Liguria and Turin's grand architecture, to the lesser-known lakes of Iseo and Orta and bear-spotting in Abruzzo, in this issue we've rounded up 21 of Italy's most iconic experiences — and no, I didn't see any bears in the Apennines. So, another reason for me to return.

Pat Riddell, editor

EDITOR OF THE YEAR – TRAVEL (BSME AWARDS 2022)

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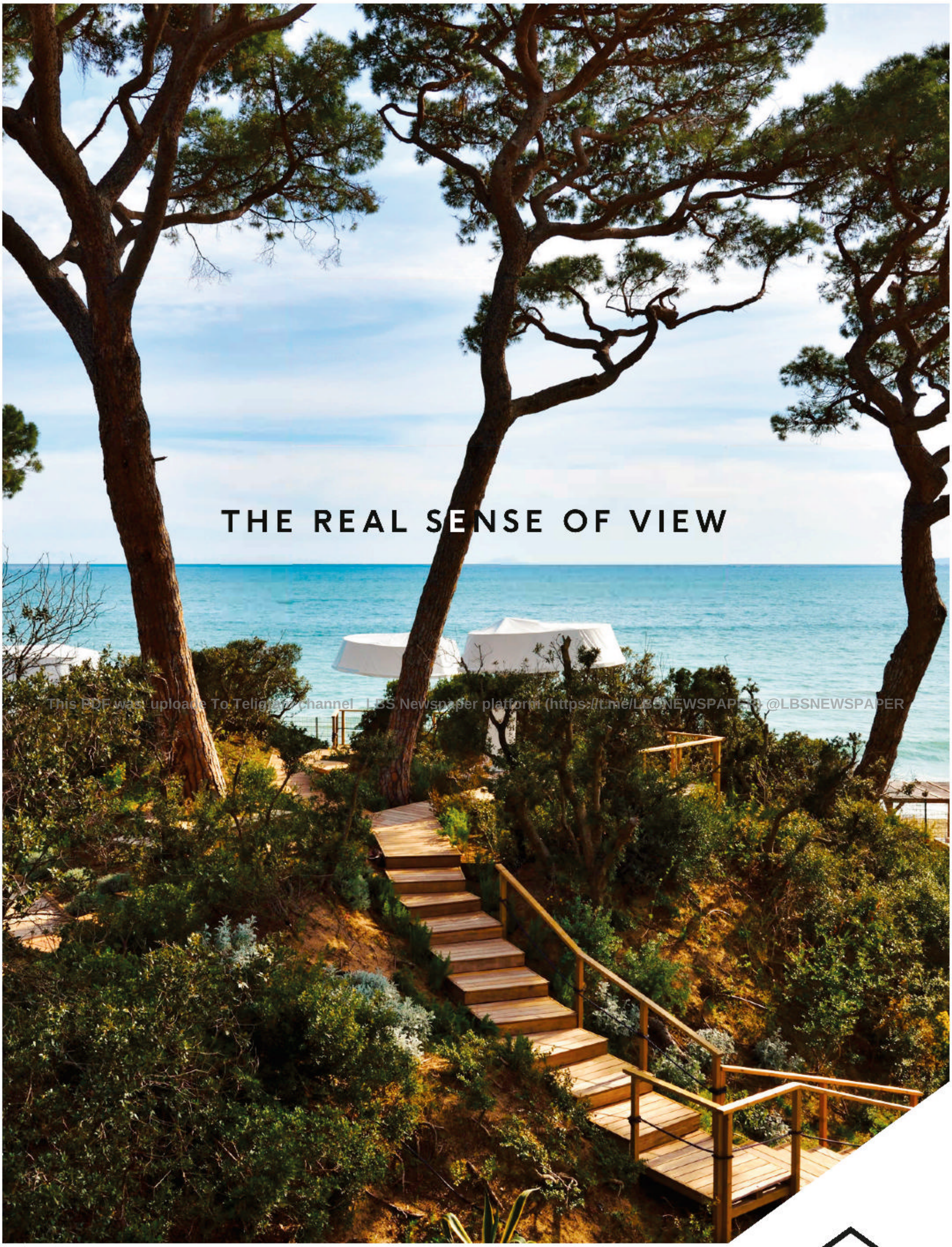

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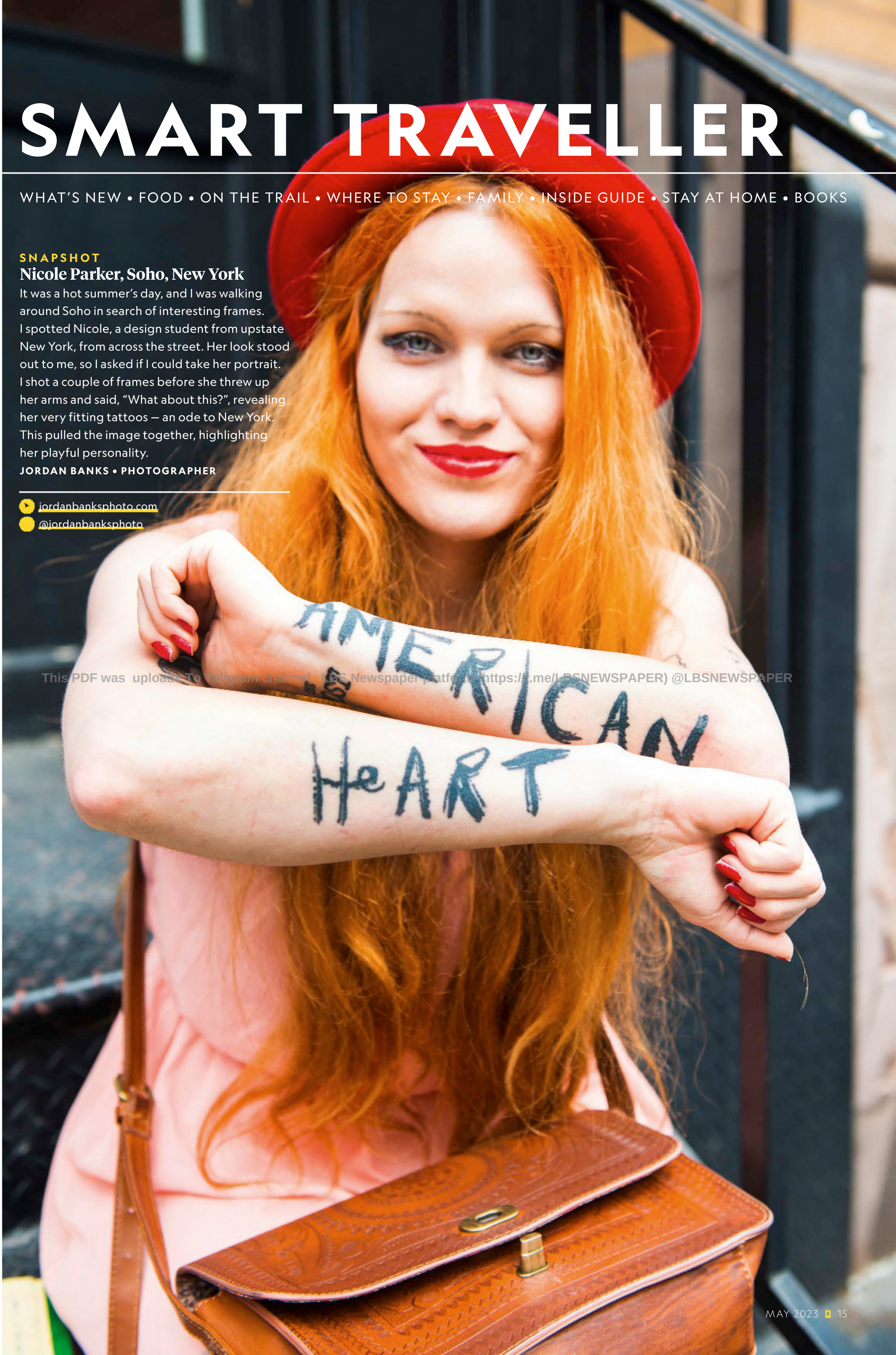

SNAPSHOT

Nicole Parker, Soho, New York

It was a hot summer's day, and I was walking around Soho in search of interesting frames. I spotted Nicole, a design student from upstate New York, from across the street. Her look stood out to me, so I asked if I could take her portrait. I shot a couple of frames before she threw up her arms and said, "What about this?", revealing her very fitting tattoos — an ode to New York. This pulled the image together, highlighting her playful personality.

JORDAN BANKS • PHOTOGRAPHER

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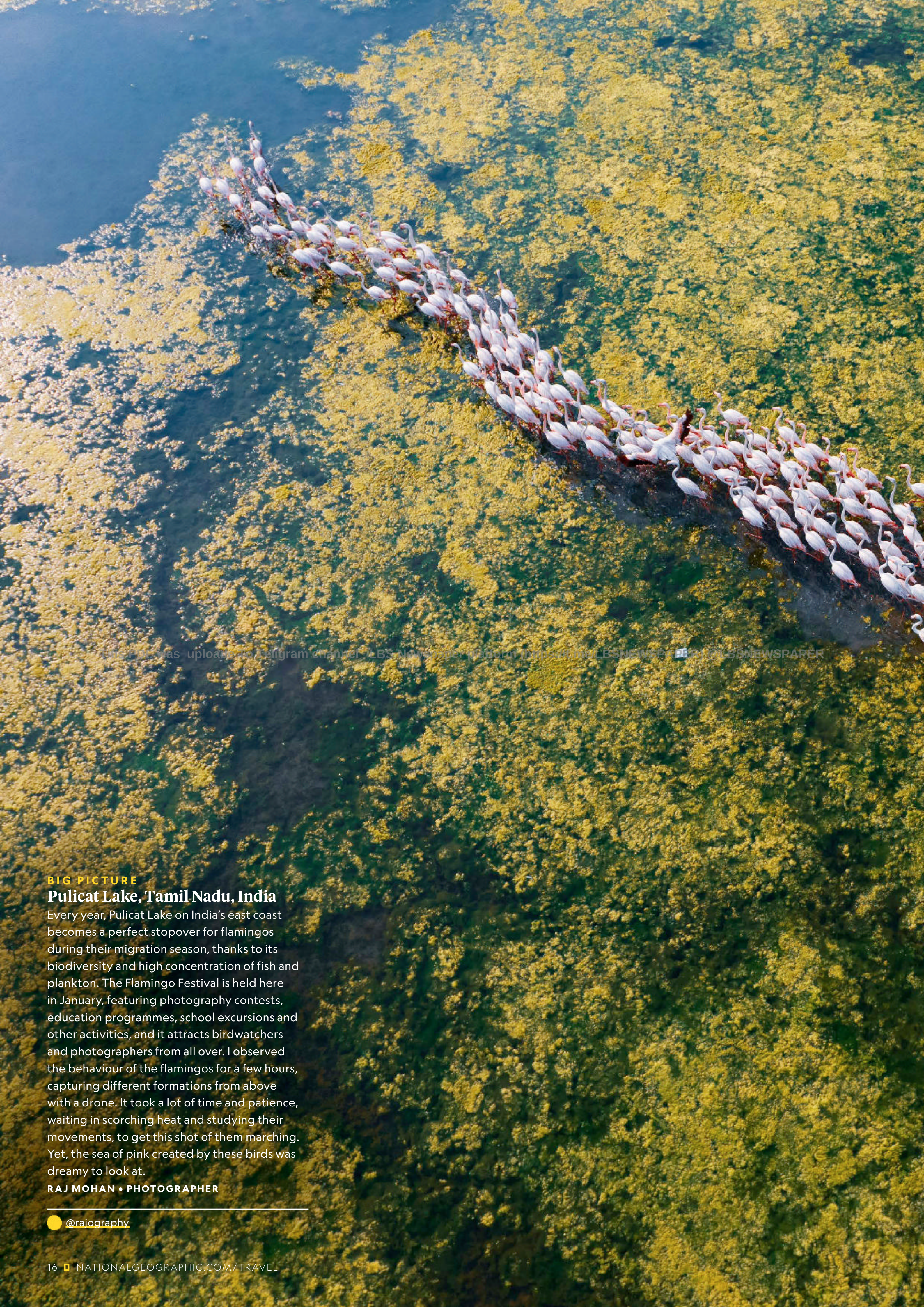

BIG PICTURE

Pulicat Lake, Tamil Nadu, India

Every year, Pulicat Lake on India's east coast becomes a perfect stopover for flamingos during their migration season, thanks to its biodiversity and high concentration of fish and plankton. The Flamingo Festival is held here in January, featuring photography contests, education programmes, school excursions and other activities, and it attracts birdwatchers and photographers from all over. I observed the behaviour of the flamingos for a few hours, capturing different formations from above with a drone. It took a lot of time and patience, waiting in scorching heat and studying their movements, to get this shot of them marching. Yet, the sea of pink created by these birds was dreamy to look at.

RAJ MOHAN • PHOTOGRAPHER

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VIVID SYDNEY

Let there be light

AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST FESTIVAL IS BACK IN NEW SOUTH WALES FOR 23 DAYS OF ILLUMINATIONS, FOOD AND MUSIC

Vivid Sydney's Yarrkalpa – Hunting Ground illuminations at Sydney Opera House, in 2022

IMAGE: DESTINATION NSW

Now in its 13th year, Vivid Sydney brings boundary-pushing artists, thinkers, musicians and chefs to New South Wales's buzzing capital, with more than three weeks of exhibitions and live events honouring creativity, innovation and technology. At the centre of the celebrations, which last year attracted 2.5 million festivalgoers, hundreds of art installations and 3D light projections will illuminate city landmarks including Circular Quay, The Rocks and Darling Harbour and, for the first time this year, The Royal Botanic Garden.

This year's festival runs from 26 May to 17 June. It also takes in a new programme of culinary events and 23 nights of free live music, with First Nations voices at the forefront. Venues including Sydney Opera House will host performances from artists such as Yothu Yindi, Ziggy Ramo, Emma Donovan and Budjerah.

Vivid Sydney Light Walk

More than 60 light installations, some incorporating water fountains, kaleidoscopic design and superscale 3D projections, line a five-mile illuminated walk that connects the city's buildings, public spaces and key landmarks. Artist John Olsen's animated piece Lighting of the Sails: Life Enlivened will be unfurling across the sails of the Sydney Opera House, an artwork influenced by his enduring love of Australian nature and landscape.

The Last Ocean

US installation artist Jen Lewin brings The Last Ocean to Sydney's Stargazer Lawn, following its 2022 debut at Burning Man. The artwork gives visitors the chance to explore her version of the Ross Sea, the Antarctic's fragile icy landscape, hewn in reclaimed ocean plastics. Step onto it and see 'sea ice' shift beneath you, triggered by each foot fall.

Lightscape

This internationally acclaimed touring show arrives in Sydney for the festival, with an immersive, multisensory one-mile trail through The Royal Botanic Garden. Walk beneath the glowing tree canopies and larger-than-life flowers, visit fire gardens and explore towering illuminated tunnels.

Vivid Food

Culinary creativity makes a festival debut this year, with pop-up restaurants, residences from celebrity chefs and night markets across the Central Business District, celebrating Sydney's highly diverse food culture. Highlights include the Vivid Fire Kitchen's flame-fuelled food festivities with special grill menus and barbecue sessions, while the Vivid Chef Series pairs landmark Sydney restaurants with global chefs. vividsydney.com

SARAH BARRELL

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NORTHUMBERLAND

DIGGING DEEP

Five years in the making, the new Ad Gefrin museum and distillery mixes Anglo-Saxon history and whisky tastings

On the cusp of the Cheviot Hills and Northumberland National Park, a new museum dedicated to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria has opened in the market town of Wooler, aiming to breathe life into the stories of the area's forgotten kings and queens.

The Ad Gefrin Anglo-Saxon museum and whisky distillery is less than five miles from the archaeological site of Gefrin, a seventh-century palace where Anglo-Saxon kings such as Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu held court in a vast complex of timber buildings, around 70 miles north of Hadrian's Wall. Aerial photographs led to the site's discovery in 1949 near the hamlet of Yeavering and it became one of the most important archaeological finds in 20th-century Britain, though little of it remains.

It's hoped the museum will encourage more people to visit the area and discover its history. "The kingdom of Northumbria was massive, and people came from all over the world to visit it," says co-founder and Northumberland local Alan Ferguson. "Ad Gefrin is a chance to rekindle the sense that this place matters."

A key feature of the museum is a replica of the Great Hall at Yeavering, created in partnership with the Gefrin Trust, which works to preserve the archaeological site. Audio-visual displays shine a light on figures of the time, and a small exhibition space displays Anglo-Saxon artefacts from Yeavering and beyond. Highlights include an astonishingly well-preserved glass claw beaker from the County Durham village of Castle Eden, discovered in 1775 and one of several items on loan from the British Museum.

Another important pillar of the museum is its sister project — the first (legal) whisky distillery to open in Northumberland for 200 years, which plans to release a Northumbrian English single malt in 2025. Visitors to the museum can buy a ticket that includes a tour of the distillery, cask store and tasting room. adgefrin.co.uk

Museum tickets £10 or £25 including a distillery tour and tasting

MATTHEW FIGG

A shield fragment at Ad Gefrin, on loan from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Above: The whisky stills at Ad Gefrin

THREE MORE NEW NORTHUMBERLAND ARRIVALS

LILIDOREI AT THE ALNWICK GARDEN

On the doorstep of Alnwick Castle, Alnwick Garden is expanding to include an enormous children's play park. Opening this summer, the £15m project is billed as a world of wonder and will include pixie houses, daily activities for kids and story-time sessions; the centrepiece will be a giant, fantastical play structure. lilidoreialnwick.co.uk

GOURMET GETAWAYS AT PINE

A stone's throw from Hadrian's Wall Path, Michelin Green-starred restaurant Pine has opened contemporary 'Hygge' cabins at Vallum Farm on the same site as the restaurant. Next to the kitchen garden, the cabins run on renewable biomass heating and have decks overlooking the countryside. From £150 per night, room only. restaurantpine.co.uk hyggeatvallum.co.uk

LAST KINGDOM AT BAMBURGH

Fans of Netflix series *The Last Kingdom*, based on the conflicts between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danes in ninth and 10th-century England, can explore the props and costumes in a new exhibition at Bamburgh Castle. It runs until 5 November, and visitors can have their photo taken on the Wessex Throne used in the series. bamburghcastle.com

IMAGES: SALLY ANN NORMAN

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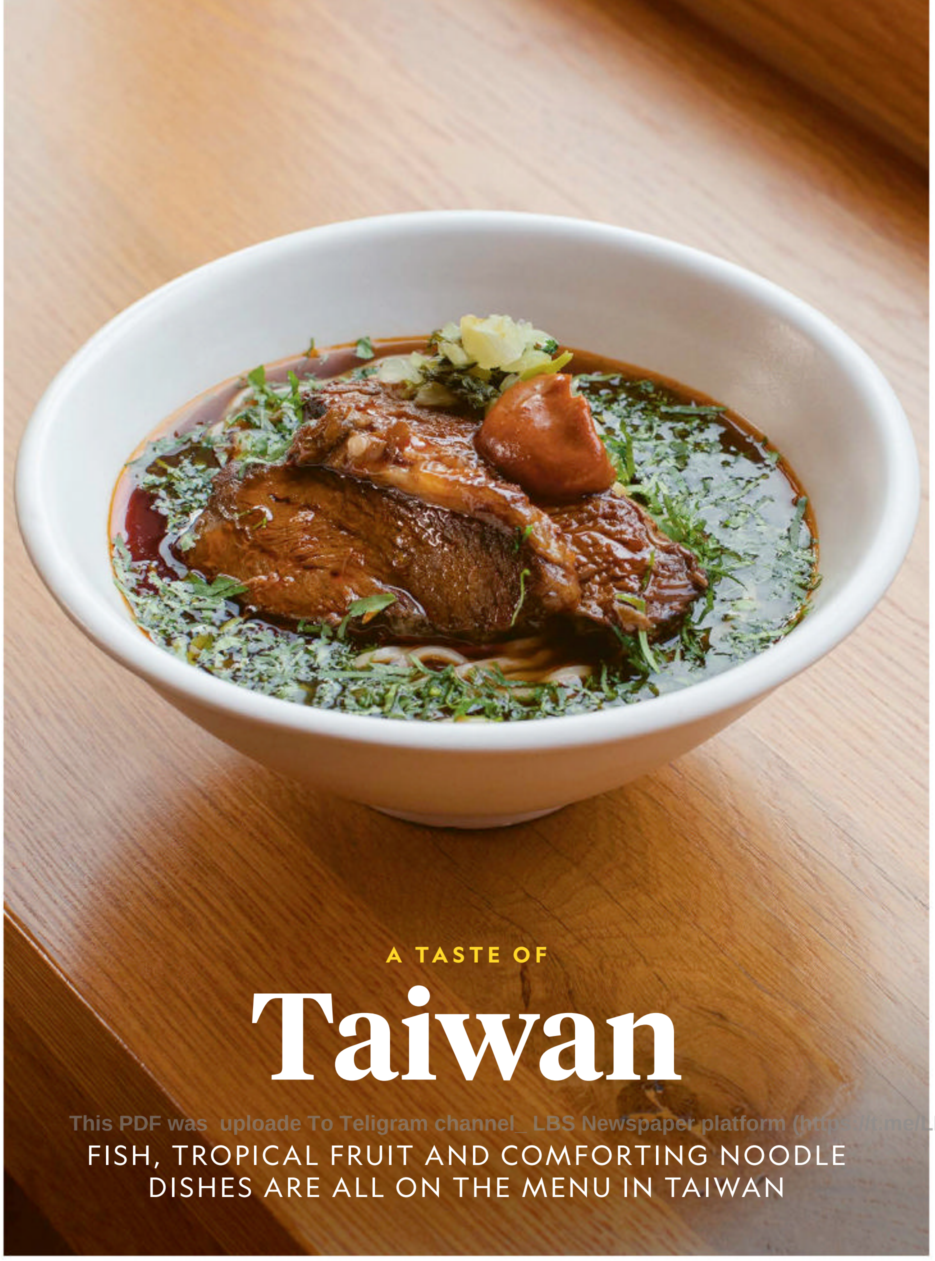


A TASTE OF

Taiwan

FISH, TROPICAL FRUIT AND COMFORTING NOODLE DISHES ARE ALL ON THE MENU IN TAIWAN

With a mainly subtropical climate and mountain ranges running the length of the island, Taiwan offers perfect conditions for growing an array of crops, from rice and tea to fruit and vegetables. And there's real pride in the produce: the aged soy my grandma uses; the competition Oolong tea with which my late grandpa was obsessed, and which never makes it outside Taiwan as it's so popular; the Chih Shang rice that needs to be edition stamped to prove its authenticity.

Fruit shops are piled high with mountains of longan fruit, sugar apples, melons and dragon fruit, all ripe and ready to eat. And, being surrounded by waters, there's access to great seafood, too, from abalone to snapper. Even the eggs in Taiwan seem to taste better than anywhere else, as the chickens are mostly wild.

Taiwan has absorbed influences from various cultures that have inhabited the island over the centuries, from Aboriginal communities to Chinese, Japanese and even Dutch. Flavours are often rich and soy-based, with a hint of sweetness due to the large sugar trade in the south of Taiwan in the 19th century. The first dish I seek out whenever I'm back is *mee shua* (oyster noodles), an addictive and comforting bowl of slightly thickened bonito-based broth (showing the Japanese influence) and silky, slurpable noodles.

Some dishes, like *mee shua*, are best enjoyed at the buzzy night markets for which Taiwan is known, but I crave home-cooked meals, too. I grew up with my grandma cooking large, banquet-style meals daily for our extended family. Dishes include cold cuts of poached meat such as black pork or goose, pan-fried fish (often fatty and flaky cobia), stir-fried greens and seafood, soy-braised pork in a clay pot and *mi fen* — a dish of vermicelli fried with shiitake, coriander and black pork. Before these meals, I'd sit on the back of my grandma's bike, whizzing through the wet markets, and afterwards, I'd be the last one left at the table, savouring every last bite.

BAO, by Erchen Chang, Shing Tat Chung and Wai Ting Chung is published by Phaidon Press (£29.95).

IMAGE: FANGYU CHO; PASCAL GROB

MUST-TRY DISHES

LU ROU FAN

A comforting dish of steaming hot short-grain rice topped with slow-braised fatty pork belly. The braising sauce trickles over the rice, coating the grains. It normally comes in a small low-lipped bowl, with a side of pickle.

BEEF NOODLES

You'll find beef noodle shops all over Taiwan, particularly in Taipei. There are many different styles: thin or thick noodles, light or rich broth. My preference is the rich, spicy broth with thinner noodles. They should have a slight bite and a good ability to soak up the flavours of the broth.

RE CHAO

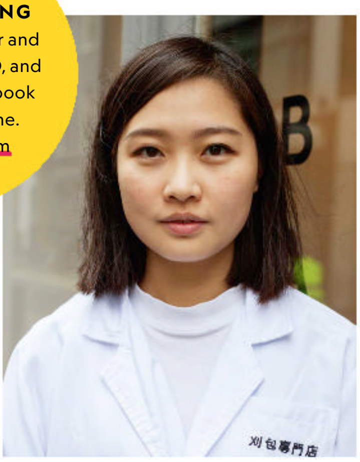
Quick fry, or *re chao*, restaurants usually have a display of seafood on ice — diners can select the one they want to eat and the chef will cook it. What exactly is on offer varies seasonally, and it's best to visit with a group to taste as many dishes as possible.

Left: Beef noodles in a spicy broth

The ingredient

Soy sauce is essential for everything from braising and quick frying to marinating and dipping. It comes in various forms, including light, dark, white and thickened

ERCHEN CHANG is creative director and co-founder of BAO, and co-author of the book of the same name. baolondon.com



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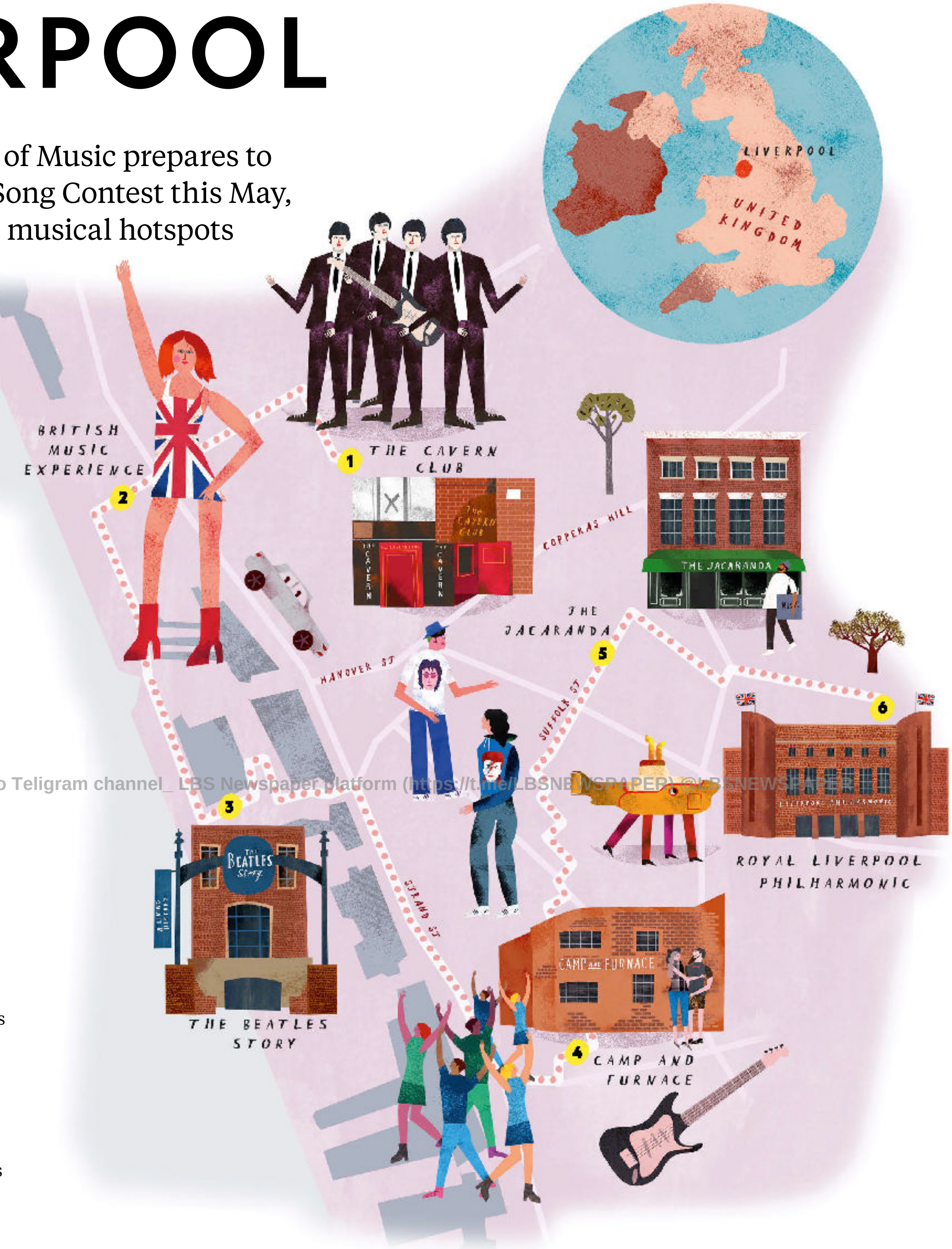
LIVERPOOL

As the UNESCO City of Music prepares to host the Eurovision Song Contest this May, set off on a tour of its musical hotspots



① THE CAVERN CLUB

Open since 1957, the Cavern will always be associated with The Beatles,who played here 292 times. Its stone walls are decked out in music memorabilia, a tribute to its long survival. The numerous stages have in more recent times welcomed the likes of Adele, Arctic Monkeys and Sir Paul McCartney himself. There's live music every night, including a Beatles tribute band on Fridays and Saturdays. cavernclub.com

② BRITISH MUSIC EXPERIENCE

Walk on to the Grade II-listed Cunard Building, a melomaniac's wildest dream. Through costumes and exhibitions, this museum tells the story of Britain as a musical powerhouse — from the British Invasion of the 1960s to the talent shows of the noughties. Expect holographic performances by Boy George and a dance booth to practise classic routines. britishmusicexperience.com

③ THE BEATLES STORY

To indulge in more Beatlemania, head to the museum depicting the chronicles of the band at the Royal Albert Dock. Inside, rooms recreate Abbey Studios, the Casbah Club (the 'birthplace of The Beatles') and even a yellow submarine. The nostalgia doesn't end there: on display are also Ringo Starr's drum kit, handwritten lyrics and the glasses John Lennon wore while he wrote Imagine. beatlesstory.com

④ CAMP AND FURNACE

In the Baltic Triangle district, abandoned warehouses have been turned into bars, restaurants and quirky event spaces. Here, the Camp and Furnace music venue is set to house this year's Euroclub — the official venue for Eurovision lovers to get together and debate who'll be getting their douze points. For nine nights in early May, it'll host a series of events to celebrate the much-loved music contest. campandfurnace.com

⑤ THE JACARANDA

Head back down towards the Ropewalks district to this historic, low-key pub, a must-see for Merseybeat fans. Situated on the bar-lined Slater Street, it was opened in 1958 by Allan Williams — the first manager of The Beatles — and is known for hosting the band during their very early days. Today, it's home to live music, a vinyl store and a great menu of coffees, beers and cocktails. jacarandaliverpool.com

⑥ ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC

End the itinerary at the art deco Liverpool Philharmonic. Originally built in 1840, it's the proud home of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, the UK's oldest continuing symphony ensemble. Head here on 13 May to watch the Eurovision final with a glass of Ukrainian-themed buck's fizz and dance the night away at the after-party. liverpoolphil.com

FARIDA ZEYNALOVA

ILLUSTRATION: MARTIN HAAKE

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WHERE TO STAY

Bath

WITH NEW ATTRACTIONS AND HOTEL OPENINGS, THE SOMERSET CITY IS FLYING HIGH THIS YEAR

Hotel Indigo Bath

While Bath has long been one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country, its quiet renaissance in recent years has made the Southwest's most storied city more appealing than ever before.

With over 5,000 listed buildings, many of handsome Georgian design, Bath preserves its distinct 18th-century character at every turn. But rather than stand still, it's been reimaginging and polishing its best assets.

The latest developments include headliners such as the new Bath World Heritage Centre, the restoration of Cleveland Pools — Britain's oldest lido — and the Bath Abbey renovations. And now there are various new and revamped hotels in town, too.

Hotel Indigo Bath opened in September 2020 on quiet South Parade, close to the city centre. The 166-room property is largely disguised on the honey-stoned Georgian terrace, hidden in 12 adjoining town houses — and the history and heritage of the buildings has been meticulously maintained. No two guest rooms are the same, but all are designed around five themes reflecting the influences of local architects and novelists. Service is friendly, welcoming and unfussy while the intimacy and comfort of the building is reason enough to return.

The Elder restaurant, which is part of the hotel but run independently by restaurateur Mike Robinson, is a refined yet relaxing dining experience. Produce is sourced sustainably, and every course displays a simplicity that still comes with a flavour-packed punch — the roast pave of fallow deer and herb-roasted chicken breast are particular standouts. From £149. bath.hotelindigo.com

The Bird

A short walk across the River Avon from central Bath — close to Holburne Museum, featured in the TV series *Bridgerton* — this Georgian manor is a quirky yet comfortable boutique hotel. The 29 rooms feature hand-crafted wallpaper, original artwork and avian-themed decor while Plate, the restaurant and terrace overlooking Bath Abbey, is popular with guests and locals alike. From £120. thebirdbath.co.uk

No.15 by GuestHouse

Situated on Great Pulteney Street, one of Bath's grandest thoroughfares, No.15 is a distinguished address with surprisingly accessible prices. Its 36 rooms, in three townhouse buildings and a separate coach house, are modern and stylish and there's a bar, restaurant and spa. From £164. guesthousehotels.co.uk/no-15-bath

The Bath Priory

Set within four acres just outside the centre, The Bath Priory is reminiscent of a country house hotel. Its pristine grounds are home to a garden spa with an indoor pool, sauna and steam room, while the hotel has garnered a stack of awards for its restaurant. The 33 rooms offer comfort and all the mod cons. From £199. thebathpriory.co.uk **PAT RIDDELL**

From top: Bar at The Elder restaurant, Hotel Indigo Bath; guest room at No.15; exterior and grounds of The Bath Priory

IMAGES: HOTEL INDIGO BATH; GUESTHOUSE HOTELS; NICKSMITHPHOTOGRAPHY.COM.
ALL RATES QUOTED ARE FOR STANDARD DOUBLES, ROOM ONLY, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED.

The Porthleven Food Festival arrives in April

Above from top: Porthleven beach; enjoy ice cream on the historic harbourside

FAMILY

CORNWALL CALLING

Rock pools, ice cream, shipwrecks and legends — for families, pretty Porthleven is hard to beat

Less than 15 miles north of Lizard Point, Porthleven is the most southerly working port in the UK. Though it was once most famous for its pilchard and mackerel output, today it's popular with families who come for the excellent food, handsome harbour and proximity to beautiful Cornish beaches. Little ones will love dipping into rock pools and clambering over the cannons fringing the harbour that were salvaged from a shipwreck, while families with older kids can test out easy hiking on the South West Coast Path.

GLORIOUS FOOD

Try the Corner Deli, where hand-spun pizzas are crisped in the wood oven, or Nauti But Ice on the historic harbourside for cones of Roskilly's brownie and marshmallow ice cream. In April, you can bring the family for the annual Food Festival, a free event celebrating Cornish food and drink with chefs such as Antony Worrall Thompson, plus music and outdoor feasts (21-23 April). thecornerdeliporthleven.co.uk nautibutice.co.uk porthlevenfoodfestival.com

SANDY ADVENTURES

The beach here is great for sand castles, crabbing in rock pools and watching pro surfers near the harbour. Later, you can pick up the South West Coast Path nearby for the 35-minute wander to Loe Bar beach and Loe Pool, the largest freshwater lake in Cornwall. Legend has it that King Arthur's sword Excalibur lies at the bottom. Just keep an eye on the tides, and return to Porthleven, which has a lifeguard in summer, if your kids feel like a paddle.

MARKET FINDS

For shopping, visit the Shipyard Market, where local galleries, craft shops and food stalls come together. It's a good place to pick up picnic supplies for the beach, and there are also quirky treats for family pets and locally made beer for parents. For little ones, there's everything from sticky jam doughnuts to unicorn cupcakes, mermaid jewellery and toys. porthlevenharbourmarket.com

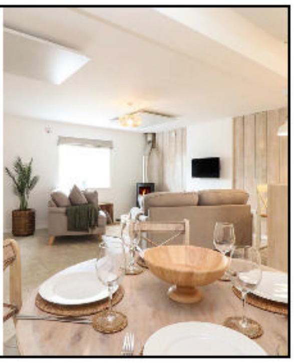
SEA CLIFF CLIMBS

For older children, climbing the sea cliffs in nearby Trewavas with a guide from Climb Cornwall makes for a fun day out. You'll wander for 20 minutes along the coast path before arriving at the beautiful white granite crag for beautiful seagull's-eye views. Suitable for children aged six and over. climbcornwall.com **MARIA PIERI**

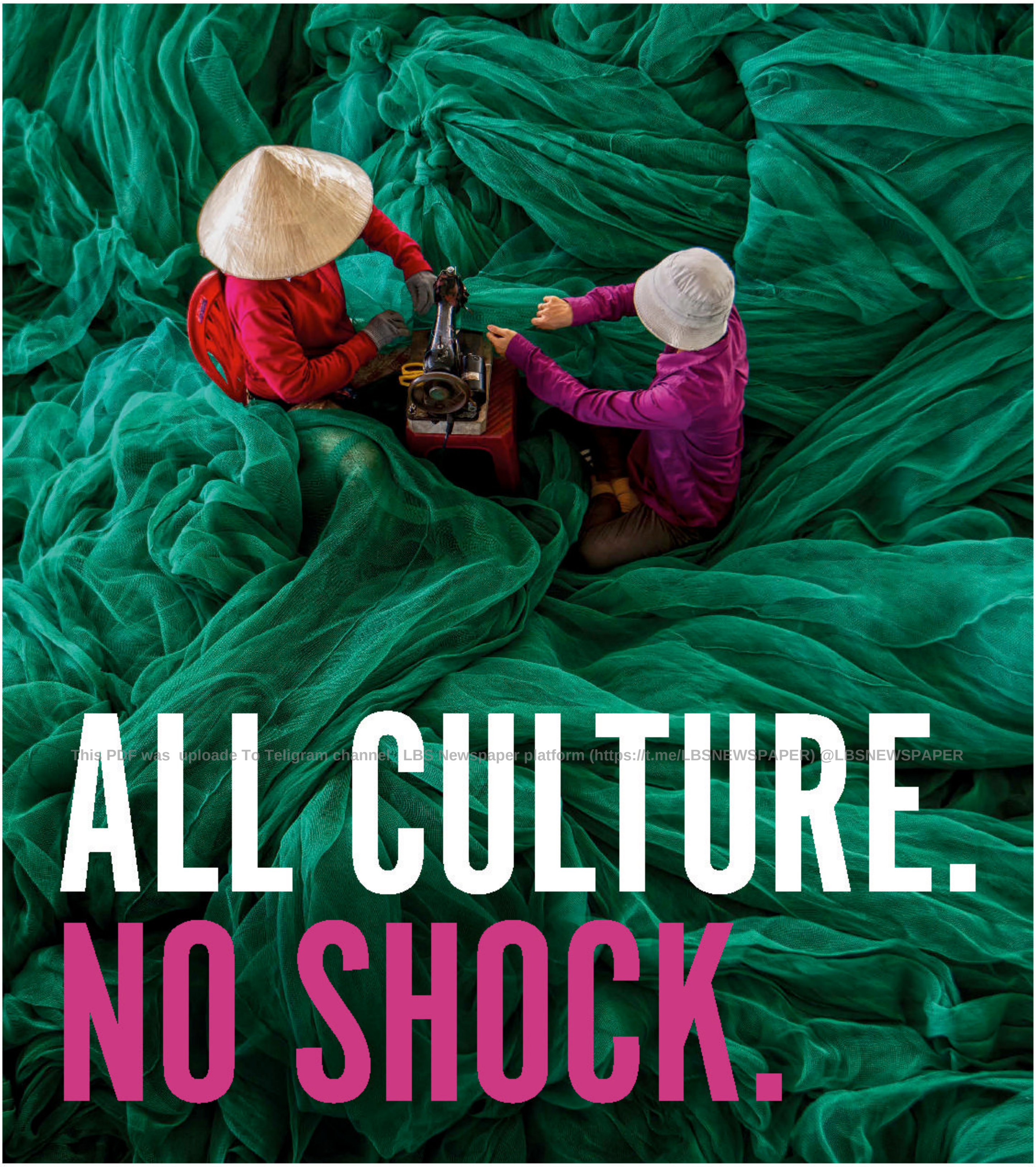
Where to stay

THE OLD POST OFFICE

In the centre, the former post office has been converted into family-friendly apartments. The one on the ground floor has two bedrooms, with a kitchen and terrace, and a wood-burning stove for cosy evenings beside the sea. Seven nights from £496. sykescottages.co.uk



IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY; SYKES HOLIDAY COTTAGES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INSIDE GUIDE

CHRISTCHURCH

COMBINING ARCHITECTURAL CHARM WITH ART, NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND CITY IS KNOWN AS MUCH FOR ITS INNOVATION AS ITS BEAUTY

Framed by the Pacific to the east and the snowy Southern Alps to the west, Christchurch (or Ōtautahi in Māori) is the largest city on New Zealand's South Island and nicknamed the Garden City for its green spaces. While it's known internationally for the series of earthquakes that rocked its foundations over a decade ago, gone are the days of a city rising from the rubble. Now, it's known as much for innovation as it is for its beauty.

Start with a coffee at chemistry-themed **Bunsen**, based in the charming clocktower of the **Christchurch Arts Centre** — which in a previous life housed science university lecture halls. Once sufficiently caffeinated, meander through the centre to take your pick of the boutique galleries and retailers. artscentre.org.nz

A stop at **The Fudge Cottage** nearby is a must. It's a central Christchurch institution, offering artisanal fudge based on a traditional family recipe: the raspberry and white chocolate and Baileys flavours have been local hits for over 20 years. Then visit the **Fragranzi Artisan Perfume Studio**, where you can create your own signature scent using fragrance bases such as tobacco, jasmine and strawberry candyfloss. fudgecottage.co.nz fragranzi.co.nz

If you're left feeling inspired, walk five minutes to the **Botanic Gardens**. Take in the pink and purple hydrangeas, which are in bloom around now, and enjoy the orange swathes of autumnal leaves. facebook.com/christchurchbotanicgardens

Next, stroll over to the **Christchurch Art Gallery**, partly for the design of the building itself. Constructed in 1998 and filled with works from the traditional to vividly contemporary, it has an impressive flowing glass facade inspired by the shape of the koru, the young frond of New Zealand's native silver fern, and the path the Avon River takes through the city. christchurchartgallery.org.nz

By now, it's likely you'll have worked up an appetite. It's through food that you can really experience the city's soul, so book a cultural food tour with **Āmiki Tours** to learn culinary secrets, get a crash course in Christchurch's Māori heritage and learn some basic te reo Māori. Don't miss the chance to try a 'boeuf-nut' — a doughnut that's stuffed with braised beef — at **Inati**. amikitours.com inati.nz

On the edge of central Christchurch you'll also find **Gatherings**, a restaurant known for sustainably caught seafood and local produce. The menu changes with the seasons, so what is on offer here is always a pleasant surprise, and the wine bar has an impressive collection of natural wines. gatherings.co.nz

For something more eclectic, there's the now legendary **Mr Wolf**, which pairs hot dogs with Champagne and caviar. Try a Big Bad Wolf with boerewors sausage and dill pickle, and for dessert pick up a cone of salted caramel ice cream from Rollickin Gelato nearby. mrwolf.nz rollickin.co.nz

Quirky **Lyttelton** on the Banks Peninsula is 20 minutes' drive away, and a popular day trip. This port town, with its cafes, live music and excellent farmers' market, is where many a musician has started their career. Pick of the venues is **Wunderbar**, which simultaneously claims to be the weirdest and coolest in New Zealand. Don't be alarmed by the lampshade fashioned from dolls' heads — the staff are some of the friendliest. wunderbar.co.nz

From Lyttelton, you can drive to the French settlement of **Akaroa**, where blue, white and red flags flap in the breeze. Alternatively, take a 10-minute ferry to **Diamond Harbour**, a convenient gateway for hiking. If you're lucky you might spot Hector's dolphins, one of the smallest in the world. akaroa.com diamondharbour.info

Stroll up the walkway from Diamond Harbour to the **Stoddart Point Reserve**, where walks range from coastal wanders to the more gruelling seven-hour return climb up Mount Herbert. Along the way, make sure you listen out for the calls of native birds, such as the moss-green, melodic korimako. **JULIETTE SIVERTSEN**

LIKE A LOCAL

Bryony Matthews' top spots for live music

Bryony Matthews is a Christchurch-based musician. Her album *We're All The Same* is out on 28 April. bryonymatthews.bandcamp.com

FLUX

In the Boxed Quarter, an arty inner-city neighbourhood, Flux is a welcoming venue for electronic music fans, with local and international artists alongside craft brews. facebook.com/fluxx.capacitor

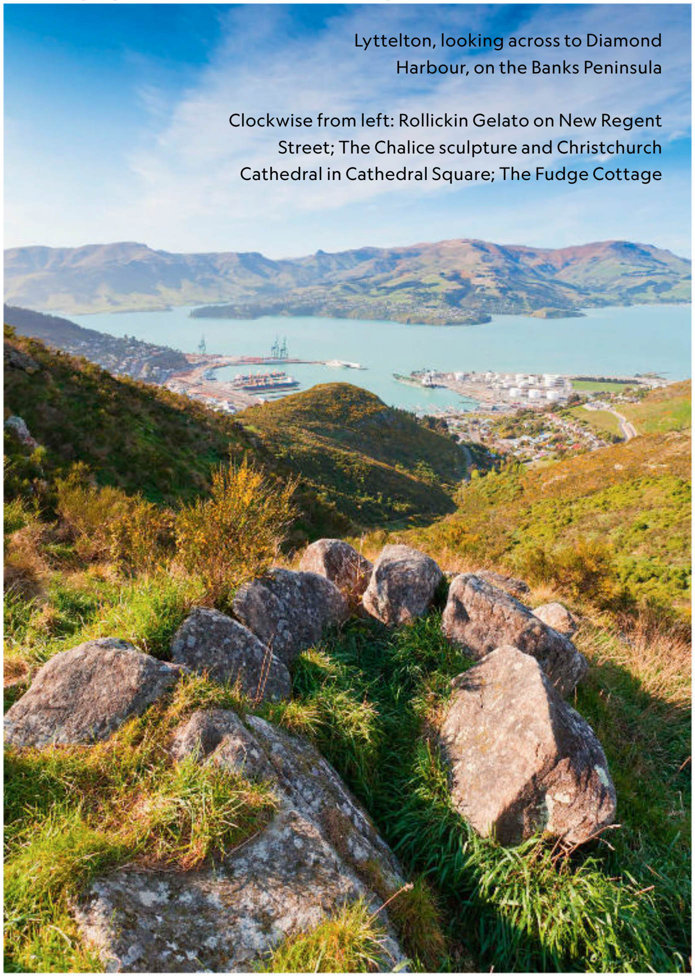
SPACE ACADEMY

This is a regular spot for music from local and touring bands, and is also home to Pizza Trap, with its inventive pizzas and beers on tap. It's a winning combo. facebook.com/spaceacademychch

12 BAR

Originally known for blues, 12 Bar expanded its musical offering after the pandemic and caters to a diverse crowd. It's next to Dark Room, which is now the city's oldest music venue. 12bar.co.nz

FUDGE
COTTAGE



Lyttelton, looking across to Diamond Harbour, on the Banks Peninsula

Clockwise from left: Rollickin Gelato on New Regent Street; The Chalice sculpture and Christchurch Cathedral in Cathedral Square; The Fudge Cottage

IMAGES: NANCY ZHOU; AWL IMAGES; ALAMY; NAOMI HAUSSMANN; FUDGE COTTAGE

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STAY AT HOME

WHITLEY BAY

This Tyne and Wear seaside town charms with its Blue Flag beach, regenerated town centre and inventive food

Why go

Whitley Bay was once best known for its caravan parks and fairground attractions, but things have changed over the past decade. Major refurbishments have blown the dust off this arty corner of Tyne and Wear, helping to place the old seaside favourite firmly back on the map.

The mile-long sandy beach, which has been Blue Flag-certified every year since 1994, is a big draw. Brave locals swim and paddleboard year-round, and surfers are well served by North Atlantic swells. For families and those who'd rather stay on the shore, a sandcastle competition is held here every year in late July or early August. visitnorthtyneside.com

What to do

Also known as The Dome, the Spanish City arts and leisure centre was first built in the early 1900s. Having been closed to the public for almost two decades, this Edwardian beauty was restored back to its former glory in 2018. It's now home to restaurants, a tearoom and a Champagne bar — a great place to swing by at the start of an evening out.

Alternatively, stop by the Whitley Bay Playhouse, hosting a variety of performances from up-and-coming comedians and quirky plays to pop acts and children's magic shows. spanishcity.co.uk playhousewhitleybay.co.uk

Where to eat

Come on Fridays and Saturdays to enjoy The Roxburgh's six-course tasting dinner. The menu changes regularly, but expect an excellent wine list and food that highlights the best of the northeast's produce: typical dishes include venison with beetroot, apple and thyme or hispi cabbage with green sauce and smash. Playful touches abound, such as homemade cola bottle sweets, while the eclectic soundtrack takes in everything from The Stooges to Patsy Cline. theroxburgh.co.uk

Where to stay

Just a few minutes' walk from the beach, the four-star York House Hotel overlooks Whitley Bay Park and the white dome of Spanish City. The 18 bedrooms are spacious and elegant, and come with breakfast. Go for a full English with all the trimmings or local kippers, with buck's fizz served at the weekends.
From £115, B&B. yorkhousehotel.com

We like

Stopping for ice cream at Di Meo's. The family-run business won a Great Taste Award last year thanks to its inventive parsnip with wine and raisin ripple flavour. More traditional options are also available, all made with fresh ingredients and milk sourced from local dairy farms. dimeos.co.uk **OLIVIA MCLEARON**

DON'T MISS

Head to the nearby town of Tynemouth and walk to St Mary's Island, which can be reached by a short causeway at low tide. It's surrounded by a nature reserve: hire a kayak and navigate islets, reefs and cliffs, keeping an eye out for grey seals. Once you've dried off, climb the 137 steps to the top of the namesake lighthouse for views that span for miles. northtyneside.gov.uk

From top: Whitley Bay beach and Spanish City; St Mary's Lighthouse

IMAGES: ALAMY

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BOOKS

Meeting of minds

LITERARY FESTIVALS ARE ALL OVER THE UK AND IRELAND THIS MONTH, IN LOCATIONS JUST AS APPEALING AS THE BOOKS THEY SHOWCASE

The Essex bridge, Dublin, Ireland

Below: Reader at The Hay Festival

Hay Festival

Set on the beautiful Wales-England border, this year's packed festival includes travel writer Kapka Kassabova delivering the 2023 Jan Morris Lecture, Ray Mears discussing the British woodland, and Bear Grylls and Ranulph Fiennes celebrating a love of wild spaces. Author-led tours with Wayfair Walks explore the Brecon Beacons, while the Lviv BookForum brings Ukraine's biggest book festival to Wales. *25 May to 4 June.* hayfestival.org/wales

Guernsey Literary Festival

Celebrating bold writing and big ideas, this event includes highlights such as a talk by Susie Dent (from Channel 4's *Countdown*) centred on her book *An Emotional Dictionary — Real Words For How We Feel*, and family-focused drawing classes from children's illustrator Rob Biddulph. The festival also offers poetry competitions, writing workshops and the chance to stretch your legs on Guernsey's coastal trails and nature walks. *2 to 14 May.* guernseyliteraryfestival.com

Stratford Literary Festival

Novelist Maggie O'Farrell, Professor Brian Cox, comedian Al Murray and poet Pam Ayres: just some of the big names set to converge on the Bard's hometown to discuss their work. And for visitors, there are plenty of opportunities to get involved, too, including a crime-writing workshop led by Ian Rankin and Elly Griffiths, and writers' bootcamps culminating in the chance to pitch to a literary agent. *2 to 7 May.* stratfordliteraryfestival.co.uk

International Literature Festival Dublin

The Georgian streets that were once fertile ground for James Joyce, W B Yeats and Oscar Wilde welcome Ireland's leading literary festival this May. The 10-day event celebrates the best Irish and international writers, poets, lyricists, playwrights and screenwriters. Book-themed guided walks are also offered. *19 to 28 May.* ilfdublin.com

The Bath Festival

This year, Bath's annual celebration of music and books has the theme 'Opening Up'. Accordingly, more than 130 talks, workshops and performances will take place in 50 elegant public buildings, with highlights including travel writer Raynor Winn in conversation with Isabella Tree on restoring our natural landscapes. *12 to 21 May.* bathfestivals.org.uk **SARAH BARRELL**

IMAGE: ALAMY; ADAM TATTON-REID

KIT LIST

PADDLEBOARDING

Make like a pro this spring and get stuck into the rising trend of paddleboarding with the help of these clever products

1 DRYROBE ADVANCE LONG SLEEVE

Made from 100% recycled materials, this classic dryrobe comes in a range of colours. What they all have in common is unparalleled comfort, warmth and drying capacity — a bear hug when you need it. Plenty of room inside offers privacy while changing, while the large waterproof pocket is great for storing valuables. £160. dryrobe.com

2 TWO BARE FEET 20PSI HT-782 INFLATE / DEFLATE ELECTRIC 12V SUP PUMP

Compatible with all 12V car power outlets, this pump will inflate your SUP alongside other common inflatables thanks to its range of nozzle attachments. It's quiet and compact, has a long cable for easier handling and switches off at the desired PSI setting. £69.99. twobarefeet.co.uk

3 VIBRAM FIVEFINGERS V-AQUA

As well as keeping your feet protected from sharp shingle, water shoes will give you extra grip on slippery surfaces and provide a layer of warmth. This barefoot-style option is sturdy and comfortable, air-dries within a day and, importantly, won't damage the surface of your paddleboard. £95. vibram.co.uk

4 ITWIT X100 10FT TOURING INFLATABLE SUP

At 9kg, this 32 inch-wide inflatable SUP is light to carry, folding away into a backpack for hassle-free transportation. It's quick to swell to 15 PSI and provides great stability on the water. The 10ft board, which comes with a detachable fin, is for paddleboarders between 60-80kg. £299.99. decathlon.co.uk

5 AQUAPLANET BUOYANCY AID

Strong swimmers may only need to rely upon the floatation of their board, but if you're not so confident, a buoyancy aid will ensure your safety. This slim-fit option weighs only 450g, allowing for freedom of movement, and includes a mesh pocket for stowing away personal items. £39.99. aquaplanetsport.com

6 FINISTERRE WOMEN'S NIEUWLAND 4S YULEX® WETSUIT

Don't let the sunshine fool you: it's the water temperature that matters, and protection is required should you fall off the board. This wetsuit is crafted from Yulex natural rubber, an alternative to neoprene, and features taped seams, flexible shoulder panels and secure wrists and ankles for zero flushing. £360. finisterre.com

7 RED ULTIMATE ULTRA-LIGHTWEIGHT 3-PIECE SUP PADDLE

Choosing a paddle is as important as picking a board. This carbon-crafted option is light as a feather, smooth in-hand and superbly streamlined. Height adjustment is straightforward, and the model collapses into three separate pieces for transportation. £349. red-equipment.co.uk

8 ACAI GO EXPLORE HOODIE

Keep yourself extra warm with this fleece-lined hoodie from womenswear specialist ACAI. The design has a water-repellent coating, with ribbed cuffs to stop drips from the paddle. Windproof yet breathable, it makes for a versatile piece of kit for all manner of adventures. £89. acaioutdoorwear.com

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WIN

A SEVEN-DAY TRIP FOR TWO TO ANTIGUA

National Geographic Traveller (UK) has teamed up with The Verandah Resort & Spa to offer an all-inclusive stay on the Caribbean island

THE DESTINATION

Located on Antigua, the larger of the Antigua and Barbuda two-island nation, The Verandah Resort & Spa is the stuff of tropical dreams. The beachfront property is spread across 30 acres of secluded northern coastline, with five suite and two villa categories to choose from. Guests have access to two stretches of white-sand beach lapped by the Caribbean's signature clear sea — as well as five swimming pools, tennis courts, an 18-hole mini golf course and a spa. For those keen to explore the island, the resort is located within walking distance of the popular Devil's Bridge National Park, a natural rock formation shaped over the years by the crashing waves.

THE PRIZE

Courtesy of The Verandah Resort & Spa, the winner and a guest will enjoy a seven-night, all-inclusive stay in a spacious Waterview Suite, with a private verandah overlooking manicured gardens and with partial sea views. Three complimentary meals a day are also included — plus snacks and alcoholic or soft beverages by the glass — at the resort's nine different dining venues, from Caribbean-inspired fare to fine-dining experiences. The prize includes return flights up to the value of $1,000 (approximately £813). It does not include airport transfers or ground transportation. Blackout dates apply. theverandahantigua.com

West Indies

From top: The Verandah Resort & Spa; chef at The Verandah Resort & Spa

TO ENTER

Answer the following question online at nationalgeographic.co.uk/competitions

HOW MANY POOLS DOES THE VERANDAH RESORT & SPA HAVE?

Competition closes 31 May 2023. The winner must be a resident of the UK and aged 18 or over. Full T&Cs at nationalgeographic.co.uk/competitions

THE VERANDAH
Resort & Spa • Antigua

IMAGES: THE VERANDAH RESORT & SPA; WINTER PARK PHOTOGRAPHY 2022

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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR

BARBARA J ZITWER

The American novelist travelled to South Korea to meet the free-diving fisherwomen of Jeju, and it changed the course of her career

I arrived on Jeju Island a novelist and left a non-fiction author. Visiting the magnificent volcanic island — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — changed my life and, most pointedly, the direction of my writing career. I'd been in my New York City apartment working on a new novel about a businesswoman from Manhattan who goes to Jeju to meet the island's famous *haenyeo* women divers, and later starts a company with them.

I'd long been fascinated by the fisherwomen of Jeju who dive without oxygen, known as the mermaids of Korea. For centuries, they've farmed the ocean collectively to support themselves and their families, some still diving as they reached their eighties and nineties. I knew their lives would be rich material, but I was struggling to make my narrative hold together. So, I decided to go to Jeju and meet these amazing women in person.

My friend, the Korean author Kyung-sook Shin, knows the island well and offered to accompany me. We flew an hour from Seoul and landed on Jeju, then picked up a rental car and drove into the countryside to the Jongdal-ri Road, the longest coastal road in the eastern part of Jeju.

Soon the landscape, dotted with hotels, motels and tourist restaurants, morphed into a dramatic black volcanic shoreline hugging the turquoise sea. We were heading for the tiny village of Jongdal-ri. Centuries ago, this was the largest salt-producing area on the island but now the salt fields have disappeared, replaced by rice paddies.

As we neared Jongdal-ri, Kyung-sook pointed out the small huts made of black rock that jutted out from the sea. They were the original shelters used by the *haenyeo*, where they gathered before diving to change their clothes and arrange supplies, and on returning, to count their catch, which they sold at market. There were statues, too, of the women carved out of black rock, a sign of the honour in which they were held.

As we continued along the ocean road, we saw new buildings made of concrete built by the *haenyeo* in recent years to replace the older stone huts, decorated with colourful murals depicting the divers. My heart raced. Finally, I was going to enter their world.

We arrived at a local inn, Feel House, and sat down to a meal that felt like a banquet. The owner was a young mother in her thirties, and she carried her infant on her back while serving us small plates of vegetables, tofu, soup and fruit. As we ate, her baby giggled and cooed.

> I saw that my decision to fly all the way to Jeju to meet her was the right one. Yang Chunja was a strong, vibrant woman soon to enter her eighth decade, yet still diving as if she was 15, still contributing to her family and her sisterhood of divers

Kyung-sook took charge of arranging my meeting with a *haenyeo* diver. The women farm abalone, shellfish and conch, yet only dive three months of the year, and it was now off season. So, while I wouldn't be able to watch them work, the island's charm had captivated me, and I was happy nonetheless.

That afternoon, we visited Jeju's museum dedicated to the *haenyeo*, with its stunning recreations of ancient *haenyeo* huts, clothes and fishing gear. A 30ft wire sculpture of a pregnant woman diver stood valiantly in the entrance. I watched video interviews with the women and learned so much about their hard lives coupled with their love of the sea. One *haenyeo* explained the ocean was like a bank that just kept giving her money (by selling fish). These were strong women, healthy women, extraordinary women — one-of-a-kind women.

Later that day, I was privileged to meet a *haenyeo* called Yang Chunja, who spoke so movingly about her life and work. She was in her seventies — young by *haenyeo* standards — and spending time with her was transformative. I saw that my decision to fly all the way to Jeju to meet her was the right one. Yang Chunja was a strong, vibrant woman soon to enter her eighth decade, yet still diving as if she was 15, still contributing to her family and her sisterhood of divers. She embodied the Korean qualities of *han*, *heung* and *jeong* — grit, joy and community — that are part of the cultural DNA. I believe these qualities are the secret to leading a fulfilling life.

After I returned from Jeju, I threw out the novel I'd been working on and decided to write *The Korean Book of Happiness* instead. After meeting the *haenyeo*, I understood their real-life stories were more resonant, more poetic, than any fictional tale I could weave. I love New York City — it's my home. Yet sometimes, the most powerful lessons you glean in life are waiting for you on an island halfway around the world, and your teacher is a modern-day mermaid. And that's the story you have to tell.

The Korean Book of Happiness: Joy, Resilience and the Art of Giving by Barbara J Zitwer is published by Short Books, £12.99.

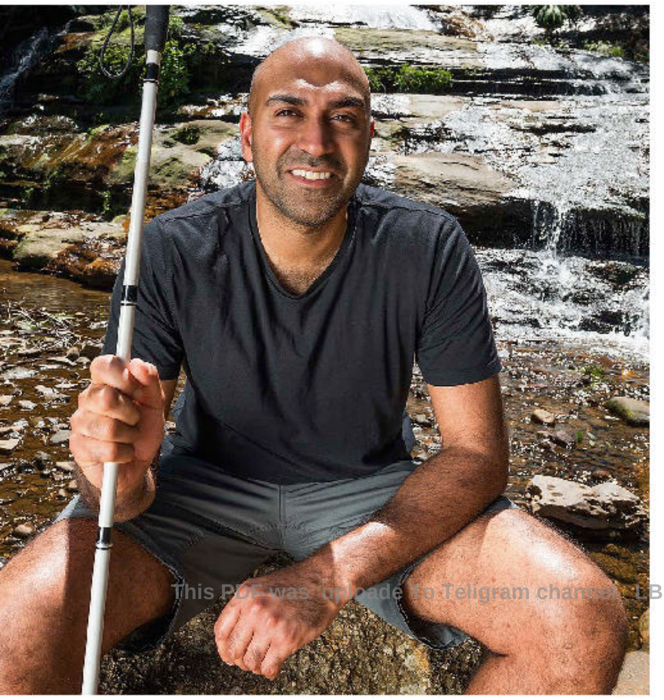
barbarajzitweragency.com

ILLUSTRATION: JACQUI OAKLEY

MEET THE ADVENTURER

Amar Latif

THE GLASWEGIAN EXPLORER DISCUSSES SENSORY DISCOVERY AND MAKING TRAVEL MORE ACCESSIBLE TO BLIND PEOPLE



When did you go on your first adventure?
I lost my sight at 18. By the third year of my maths and stats degree, I'd decided enough was enough — I wasn't going to tiptoe through life wrapped up in cotton wool. Against the wishes of my lecturers and parents, I headed off to Canada alone to study in Kingston. That taught me your world becomes bigger when you push your limits.

How did you put that lesson into practice?
In 2005, I took part in a 220-mile trek across Nicaragua alongside 10 other people with disabilities for a BBC Two documentary series called *Beyond Boundaries*. We had to work as a team to travel through tropical rainforests and a shark-infested lake, as well as up a 5,000ft volcano. I pushed a wheelchair through dense jungle; no amount of exercise could have prepared me for that, it became all about mental resilience. Then, you begin to crave that feeling of uneasiness. When it's tough — that's when you're growing.

How do you experience a new place?
With all my senses. As a blind person, I feel the sun and the smells, seeking out exciting sensory adventures. In Egypt, I'll touch 3,000-year-old temples, feeling the hieroglyphics — the Egyptians must have been really cool, they made accessible language! In Italy, I'll go to Tuscan farmhouses and cook pasta, noticing the aromas of basil and tomato in the air. To know what a place looks like, I'll ask my sighted guide to describe it and build vivid pictures in my mind.

How are sighted guides encouraged to describe things?
Like a normal conversation. I love it when people give me the overview first. When you look at a picture, you don't glance at the little details straight away. As words go into my ears, they translate into beautiful pictures. Then, kerching! I'll keep the imagery and mix it with other sensory details. If I'm at Victoria Falls, I'll have the falls described to me — the sheer grandeur of them — then feel the spray on my face. I hear the thunderous falls, aware of their smell. It all adds up to an incredible experience.

In 2004, you set up Traveleyes, the first tour operator providing independent travel for blind people. Why?
When I approached mainstream tour operators, I faced rejection. They said, even with a carer, I couldn't do adventures like skiing or sailing. This restriction left me feeling powerless. My world was closing in — I felt blind once again. Then, I realised I've only got one life. If I wanted something that didn't exist, I'd have to build it myself.

What impact has Traveleyes had?
In the past, many blind people didn't travel, and when they did, it wasn't on their own terms. When they join Traveleyes, where they're grouped with sighted travellers [who are asked to describe the sights], they want to say yes to everything. Trips open your mind, and many blind travellers can take that confidence back home.

You may think blind people get more out of these trips, but I'd say sighted travellers come away totally inspired. Blind travellers are halfway around the world, jumping out of planes and horse-riding across sugarcane plantations. It makes guides look at their lives differently.

What makes adventure so important to you?
I had one of my most amazing experiences on a floating island in Lake Titicaca. I took a group in 2010, and the Indigenous people had never met anybody blind before. When I took another group a few weeks later, they'd made a scale model of the island so that the VIPs (visually impaired people) could touch them. It doesn't matter where you go, finding that connection is priceless.

What advice would you give to young blind people?
It's natural to feel the world has closed for you, but when you have a positive mindset, obstacles become opportunities. Don't spend time worrying. This life isn't a dress rehearsal, so get stuck in. **INTERVIEW: OLIVER JAKES**

Amar Latif has travelled to more than 100 countries. In 2005, he was named Junior Chamber International's Outstanding Young Business Entrepreneur of the World for his company, Traveleyes. He's a patron of several charities, including SeeAbility and the Rafiki Thabo Foundation. traveleyes-international.com
@theamarlatif amarlatif.com

READ THE FULL INTERVIEW ONLINE AT NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM/TRAVEL

IMAGE: BEN PEARSE

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ESTRELLA DAMM

WHAT'S ONLINE

WHAT'S ON IN MAY

With summer on the way, Europe's beach resorts are getting ready to host an array of seaside festivals and arts events. Words: Sarah Barrell

As temperatures start to rise in Europe, many of the continent's lidos and beach clubs open up this month, and Ibiza's superclub season gets underway with big opening parties. There are also plenty of seaside arts festivals to get you in the mood for summer, notably Brighton Festival, an arts event that takes over the Sussex coastal city, and Primavera Sound in Spain, bringing international pop and electro acts to Barcelona, followed by Porto and Madrid in early June. Across the UK and Ireland, carpets of bluebells are blooming in ancient woodlands, and dedicated trails at National Trust estates let fans stroll among them. It's also the season for marine migrations, with whale sharks arriving on Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef, dolphins and blue whales appearing in Madeira and the possibility of orca sightings off the coast of Scotland.

Paris, France

Night of the Museums (13 May) is just one excuse to book a trip to Paris in late spring. During this annual event, arts and culture institutions offer free admission and keep their doors open until as late as midnight, with special illuminations and DJ sessions.

May is also a great time to explore Paris as an open-air gallery. The forecourt palisades at Notre-Dame Cathedral are currently hosting a free exhibition of drawings depicting its ongoing reconstruction, while the Tuileries Tunnel, a defunct underground road link (now an 800-metre-long street art gallery), has Paris-themed murals by European street artists including Andrea Ravo Mattoni and Madame.

Sustainable travel tip: If you time your visit with the first Sunday of the month, the centre of Paris will be fully pedestrianised.

Memphis, US

During the Memphis in May festival, artists, musicians and chefs converge on the Tennessee home of blues, soul and rock 'n' roll for a month-long event. Expect street music, barbecue cook-offs and sports events including the Great American River Run along the banks of the Mississippi. A recent revamp of riverfront Tom Lee Park has created new pavilions, sound gardens and a Canopy Walk connecting the park to Downtown, while recent urban investment has led to a hotel boom, with many new openings set in revived historic buildings, including a former train stop reborn as The Central Station Memphis.

Sustainable travel tip: Memphis has 400 miles of bike trails; try the recently launched Wolf River Greenway along the Mississippi River.

READ MORE ONLINE

TOP STORIES

Here's what you've been enjoying on natgeo.com/travel this month

STARGAZING

'Archaeoastronomy' tours

Exploring the link between the Moon, the stars and human history in Cornwall

NATIONAL PARKS

Superblooms in the Atacama

Chile's new Desierto Florido National Park will protect around 200 species of flower

CANADA

Walking the ocean floor

The Bay of Fundy has the world's highest tides, making New Brunswick a fossil-hunting haven

ULTIMATE FRENCH COOK-OFF: 100 VOLUNTEERS, 15,000 EGGS

DURING BESSIÈRES' GIANT OMELETTE FESTIVAL, LOCALS CELEBRATE EASTER WITH AN UNUSUAL CULINARY TRADITION. WORDS: CAROLYN BOYD

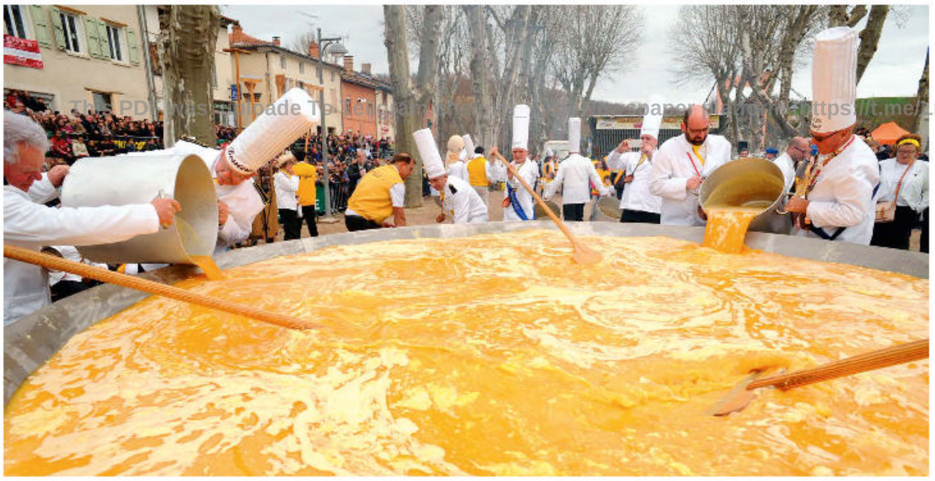
France does a good line in food festivals, celebrating everything from lemons in Menton to the pink onions of Roscoff. Yet few can rival Bessières' Fête de l'Omelette Géante ('Giant Omelette Festival') for ambition. This three-day event, which combines dinners, Easter Egg hunts, parades and performances, culminates on Easter Monday with a grand culinary feat: the cooking of a colossal, 15,000-egg omelette, big enough to feed 2,000 locals and visitors.

By the time I arrive, the organisers — the grandly named Global Brotherhood of the Knights of the Giant Omelette — have already cordoned off the marketplace. A bonfire crackles, while about 100 volunteers, all dressed in yellow and white, gather around a long table and begin cracking eggs into large bowls.

The legend that often gets touted as the festival's origin tells of the occasion when Napoleon Bonaparte supposedly stopped off at an *auberge* (small hotel) nearby and was so enamoured with the omelette he ate there that he returned the next day with his army and ordered the innkeeper to prepare one large enough to feed them all. "Yes, some people tell that story," says a local man, rolling his eyes. "But it's really about community and friendship around the world."

In 2023, the festival marks its 50th anniversary. During its half-century, it's inspired six other giant omelette festivals around the world, in France, Belgium, Argentina, the US and Canada.

READ MORE ONLINE



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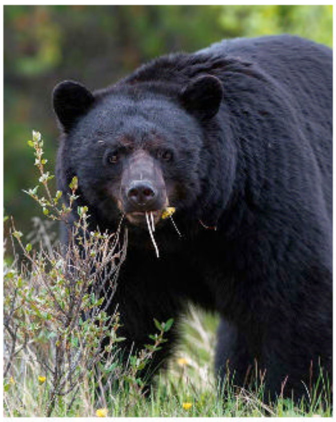

ANIMALS

The story behind Cocaine Bear
The new comedy-horror film is based on the true story of an American black bear found dead in a Georgia forest in 1985, having eaten cocaine dumped by smugglers — and it illustrates how human recklessness endangers wildlife. natgeo.com/animals

ENVIRONMENT

Climate change need for action
People can adapt, but also urgently need to make substantial, immediate emissions cuts to head off even worse impacts, according to a new UN report. natgeo.com/environment

SCIENCE

Meet the residents of Sun City
Photographer Kendrick Brinson has returned to photograph the Arizona town where retirees attend prom and join cheer squads, and ageing is actually fun. natgeo.com/science

EXPLAINER

Air turbulence
The science behind it and how to cope with this natural, and often scary, phenomenon during a flight

GEORGIA

Indigenous justice
The US state is set to get its first national park, at Ocmulgee Mounds, co-run by the Muscogee Nation

CULTURE

Bali and its artisans
How elaborate masks and costumed dancing form part of the Indonesian island's complex culture

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WEEKENDER

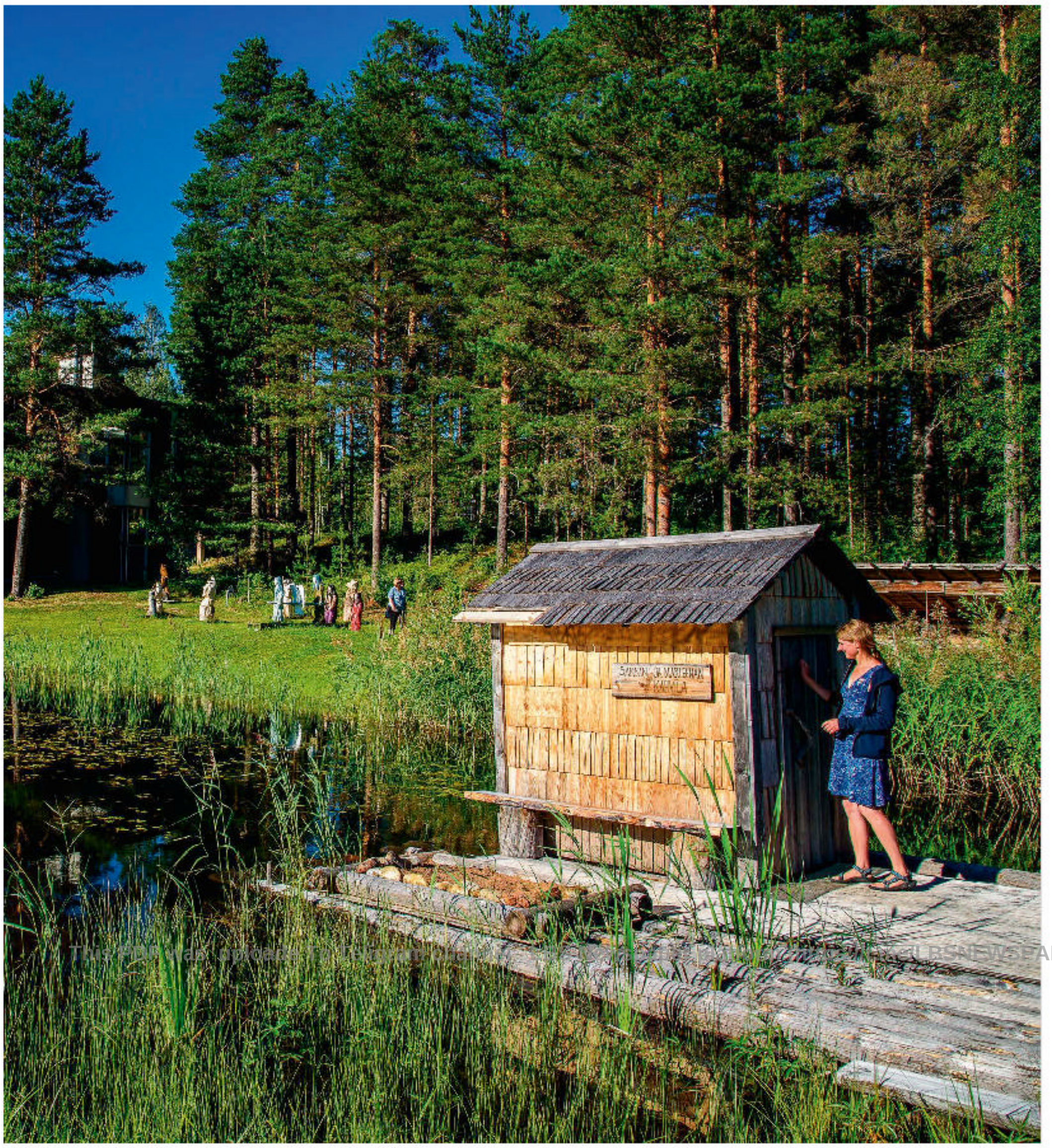
PUNKAHARJU

Ringed by forests and quiet islets, this wildlife-filled region of the Finnish Lakelands offers a maze of waterways where visitors can retreat for kayaking trips, summer swims and waterside hikes. Words: Jini Reddy

Relatively little-known outside Finland, but just under four hours northeast of Helsinki by train, Punkaharju is a tranquil land of birch and spruce trees, pristine waters and clear, crisp air. Located in eastern Finland, within the Saimaa region and part of the vast Finnish Lakelands area, it's one of the country's designated National Landscapes — an accolade reflecting its wild beauty and the important role forest culture plays in the Finnish psyche.

A haven for wildlife and outdoors lovers, Punkaharju is where Finns come to retreat and recharge. It's easy to see why the area has long been a magnet for artists, writers and poets — rumour has it, it even inspired JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth fantasies. The labyrinthine waterways of Lake Saimaa, Finland's largest with just over 9,300 miles of coastline, dominates the landscape. On long, light-filled summer days, visitors come to swim, hike, paddle, cruise and cycle — but, given its size, you'll often not encounter another soul.

Delve deeper and discover contemporary art galleries and gastronomic delights inspired by foraged forest foods. Go slow and explore Punkaharju's forests by foot or on two wheels, or dip a toe into the wider Saimaa region to find world-class opera, quiet towns such as Mikkeli and Imatra, and a bounty of farm-to-fork producers.



DAY ONE HERITAGE & LAKE VIEWS

Morning

Get to grips with the area's heritage at the elegant, pastel-pink Hotelli Punkaharju, Finland's oldest hotel. Lying in a pine forest on a ridge overlooking Lake Saimaa, it's a place of pilgrimage for Finns. In 1803, when Punkaharju was occupied by Russia shortly before the Finnish War, the Russian Emperor Alexander I was so entranced by the area's beauty that he passed a law declaring it protected land. In 1845, a forest ranger's house was built on the site, rooms for travellers were added and the hotel was founded. Today, the property is owned by Finnish supermodel and mushroom forager Saimi Hoyer and has become the beating heart of Punkaharju's cultural scene. hotellipunkaharju.fi

Afternoon

Hike or bike along the lovely 1.5 mile Topeliuksen polku Nature Trail (mountain bikes can be hired at the hotel). It's part of the 17.4 mile Harjureitti Trail and winds its way along the edge of Lake Saimaa. Don't be in any rush — you'll want to linger to inhale the sweet scent of pine, listen for the call of a tree pipit and spend time gazing at the calm water. The trail ends in the grounds of Kruunupuisto, an old-school health resort offering various treatments. From here you can join the stunning, narrow-ridge road back to Punkaharju village. Finns voted the road the most scenic in the country and it lives up to the accolade. Follow it to the village and pick up a *korvapuusti* (cinnamon bun) at the local bakery for the slow journey back.

Evening

Thirty minutes from Punkaharju by train or car is Savonlinna, a city on an archipelago, noted for its world-class opera festival. The annual event is held at the medieval Olavinlinna Castle throughout July and is worth visiting whether you're an opera buff or not. Built in the 15th century on a rock in the middle of Lake Saimaa and accessed via a bridge, the stone castle is wonderfully atmospheric. Before the performance, snack on *mustikkapiirakka* (blueberry pie) at Cafe Saima, a family-run cafe-restaurant near the harbour. Alternatively, opt for a 90-minute sunset sightseeing cruise on the *S/S Punkaharju* steamboat for unique views of the castle and cityscape. operafestival.fi kahvilasaima.fi vipcruise.info

TOP THREE

Wildlife experiences

SAIMAA RINGED SEAL SAFARI

The Saimaa ringed seal is one of the rarest seals in the world. Known for its distinctive patterned coat, it can only be found in Lake Saimaa. Get a glimpse of the chubby creature on a small-group safari in Linnansaari National Park, led by a wilderness guide. oravivillage.com/en/activities

BIRD-WATCHING TRAIL

Between spring and autumn, migratory birds flock to Siikalahti Nature Reserve in Parikkala. A 30-minute drive from Punkaharju, it's one of Finland's prime bird-watching spots and home to nesting species, too. Walk the half-mile Siikalahti birdwatching trail and you may glimpse the great bittern, horned grebe, western marsh harrier or one of 20 species of dragonfly. visitparikkala.com/birdwatching

ELK SPOTTING

These antlered creatures live deep in the forests of Punkaharju and venture out at dawn or dusk. The two-mile Kokonharju Trail through primeval forest, adjacent to the Punkaharju Research Park, is a good place to keep an eye out for the elk, or their footprints.

Clockwise from left: Aerial view of a narrow stretch of land crossing a lake in Punkaharju, on a sunny summer day; Punkaharju Arboretum, Savonlinna

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

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DAY TWO MUSEUMS, ART & RELAXATION

Morning

Walk to the Finnish Forest Museum Lusto, housed in a striking building with a cylindrically shaped core designed to mimic the ring of a tree. From Hotelli Punkaharju, it can be reached via a path that crosses the Pususilta, a wooden kissing bridge built in the 1930s. The museum explores the Finns' relationship with the forest, which revolves around berry-picking, hunting and hiking, and plays an important role in the country's green building revolution, which champions wood and other renewable materials. Not to be missed is the fascinating mythology exhibit, celebrating forest lore, mysticism and the powerful creatures that inhabit the forest depths, in particular the bear. lusto.fi

Afternoon

After a lunch of *rieska* (Finnish flatbread) with smoked fish or mushroom toppings at the Finnish Forest Museum restaurant, cross the road for a visit to the Aseman Taidelaiture gallery in Lusto train station. This eccentric art house is the private home of two Finnish collectors. Wander through rooms bursting with colour and expressive paintings by contemporary Finnish artists, including rock musician Andy McCoy, who's said to use his own blood in his paintings. A 30-minute walk from here is the Johanna Oras Gallery in a charming manor house surrounded by spacious grounds. Nature is a major inspiration for the Finnish contemporary artist's works. asemantaidelaituri.fi johannaoras.com

Evening

Join a guided 'Wine in the Woods' sensory experience. It begins with a 30-minute stroll through the woods near the north shore of Laukansaari, in the Punkaharju Research Park area — home to the tallest tree in Finland,a European larch. The walk segues into a delicious Finnish-style tapas and wine-tasting. This takes place next to a log shelter at Karjalankallio lookout point, overlooking the waters of Lake Puruvesi, with small bites starring local seasonal ingredients and wild herbs, and wine from the Finnish Noita Winery. Alternatively, spend the early evening on a canoe, kayak or SUP board, paddling around Lake Saimaa to explore little bays. You may hear the splash of pike or even spot a seal. hotellipunkaharju.fi

Right: Johanna Oras Gallery is in the grounds of a manor house built in the 1910s

IMAGE: JOHANNA ORAS

TOP FIVE

Food experiences

TERTTI MANOR

Not far from the market town of Mikkeli, Tertti Manor is a family-run, wild-food farm and gastronomic haunt, where pheasant, pike, forest herbs and garden produce feature on the menu. tertinkartano.fi

MUSHROOM-HUNTING CRUISE

Departing from the Savonlinna passenger harbour, embark on an unusual day-long boat excursion searching for mushrooms among the forested islands in the Saimaa Lakeland. Trips run in August and September, and guides include a biologist. hotellipunkaharju.fi/en/experiences

THE KARELIAN PIE WORKSHOP

The traditional pie of the region is made with rice porridge in a rye crust and often served with butter mashed with hard-boiled eggs. Learn how to make the addictive treat in a Finnish country home on Niinisaari Island in Puumala, an archipelago on the Lake Saimaa waterways. okkolanlomamokit.com

TEAHOUSE OF WEHMAIS

Wehmais, in rural Juva, is home to the country's only teahouse-bistro, offering over 100 varieties of tea. It's presided over by one of Finland's few tea sommeliers, Anna Grotenfelt-Paunonen. teahouse.fi

LÖRTSY AT SAVONLINNA MARKET

Finland's half-moon-shaped pasty, *lörtsy*, was invented in Savonlinna. Every weekend morning you can try both sweet and savoury versions at the market in the town square, close to the harbour.

Trekker crossing a hanging bridge in Repovesi National Park, Finland

Did you know?

The spectacular yellow wooden 19th-century Church of Kerimäki is one of the largest wooden churches in the world and, astonishingly, seats more than 3,000 people. With its striking chandeliers, stained-glass windows and high ceilings, it's worth the 30-minute bus ride from Savonlinna to see it.

THREE MORE LAKELAND NATURE RESERVES

There's no shortage of spectacular spots to explore in Finland, so if you're seeking even more in the way of forests, lakes and mountains, consider one of these three unspoilt destinations

Kolovesi National Park

With vertical cliffs that rise above the lake channels, mysterious ancient art and pristine forest, Kolovesi is a special wilderness. Just over 30 miles from Savonlinna, it's one of the few parts of the Saimaa Lake system where motorboating is prohibited to preserve the peace. With few hiking trails, it's best explored through its waterways. Kayakers will enjoy the maze of water trails, charming islands and crystal-clear waters. You can also paddle to see rock paintings on the side of Ukonvuori Hill. Disembark at a small landing and walk along the rocks to a viewing walkway. The paintings include depictions of human figures that suggest hunting and fishing activity flourished in the area more than 5,000 years ago. nationalparks.fi/kolovesinp

Hytermä

Located in the clear waters of Lake Puruvesi, this secret island is a nature reserve and part of a small archipelago, but it's also home to an unusual collection of stone art and old buildings. The outdoor museum of sorts is the legacy of one of Hytermä's former inhabitants, Heikki Väyrynen, an eccentric ex-police chief and forest caretaker known for his love of collecting old objects. On the island, there's a nature trail and a sandy beach, ideal for a quick dip in the lake. Hytermä is accessible only by water. Hire a rowing boat online and you'll be given a code to unlock keys and equipment. Alternatively, book a guided trip. The landing is 18.5 miles from Savonlinna, but from here it's only half a mile paddle to the island. visitsavonlinna.fi/en/hyterma

Repovesi National Park

A three-hour drive south of Punkaharju, Repovesi is a mosaic of forest, granite hills, streams, bays and lakes. It's a wildlife haven — butterflies flit through trees and foxes prowl at night. With around 28 miles of marked trails, from short wheelchair-accessible routes to steep climbs, it's also ideal for hiking. A favourite route is the three-mile Ketunlenkki Trail, which includes a crossing on a hand-operated pull ferry. The 164ft vertical rock face of Olhavanvuori is one of the top rock-climbing destinations in Finland. The less agile can watch climbers' antics from the shores of Olhavanlampi Lake or ascend a set of sheer steps to the summit of Katajavuori Hill, one of the most tranquil spots in Repovesi. visitrepovesi.fi ■

MORE INFO

visitfinland.com

visitsaimaa.fi

HOW TO DO IT

Finnair flies direct from Heathrow and Manchester to Helsinki. Punkaharju is three hours and 40 minutes from Helsinki by train to Lusto, Retretti or Punkaharju stations. Car rental agencies operate at the airport. finnair.com vr.fi

Hotelli Punkaharju from £199 for a villa room or from £129 for a forest cabin with shared facilities, both B&B. hotellipunkaharju.fi

IMAGE: ALAMY

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EAT

NAPA VALLEY

It may be synonymous with vineyards and bold Cabernet Sauvignon, but dig deeper and you'll find experimental menus rich in local produce and a gutsy craft beer movement that prove there's more to the region than grapes

WORDS: ALICIA MILLER

On the sidewalks of St Helena, just over an hour north of San Francisco, it feels hot enough to fry an egg on the pavement. It's around 35C on the manicured high street of the wine town, the heat radiating across the clipped rows of the surrounding vineyards. So naturally, I blame thirst for driving me into a cool tasting room at just 11am. Not that I should have to explain myself; this is Napa Valley, where drinking is encouraged.

Surrounded by steel tanks and barrels, effervescent assistant Zack spends an hour pouring me samples. Then, a dozen boozy splashes in, when things have gone pleasantly fuzzy and the outdoor heat has faded to distant memory, he pulls out one final bottle. "This," he says, filling my glass, "is really special; it has notes of mandarin and lemongrass." I breathe in the zesty aromas and sip deep. Now that's one heck of a beer.

Yes, beer in Napa Valley, America's most famous wine region. Here, where most worship at the altar of the grape — specifically, bold, tannic Cabernet Sauvignon — it takes imagination to do something different. More than that: with both tourism and local economics skewed heavily towards wine, it also takes guts.

Nile Zacherle, founder of Mad Fritz Beer, definitely has that. While training in brewing decades ago, he found the increasingly generic ingredients used in mass-market beers uninspiring, so switched to winemaking. Later, as the craft beer movement grew, he saw a gap in the market for a quality Napa variety and started Mad Fritz alongside his vinous day job.

"Imagine all wineries got their grapes from exactly the same place," Nile explains to me. "That's pretty much what commodity brewing is. But we wanted authenticity of origin behind our ingredients." In other words, Nile wanted to make his beers like wine, sourcing grain carefully (he grows some himself), malting in house, barrel-ageing in French oak and bottle conditioning. His brews range in style from the citrussy white ale I am sipping to botanical-infused gruit, and contain bases like spelt or heirloom blue corn. His piece-de-resistance Napa Ale is a "reflection of time and place", using Oak Knoll District barley and local hops. Obviously — I think to myself, polishing off my beer and heading back into the St Helena sunshine — this valley can grow more than grapes.

Napa hasn't always been about wine. Before the landmark Judgment of Paris in 1976, when Californian vintages triumphed over French in a blind panel tasting (depicted in the film *Bottle Shock*), this sun-drenched corner was a hippie, agricultural backwater. But in 50 years, it's become one of the world's most prestigious wine regions, with its Cabernet

IMAGES: RYAN LAHIFF; ASHES&DIAMONDS; JEFF BRAMWELL

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Tank Garage Winery

Clockwise from left: Oxbow Public Market; Ashes & Diamonds Winery; Mad Fritz brewery

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Dishes at Ashes & Diamonds Winery

A TASTE OF
Napa

ASHES & DIAMONDS WINERY
The design of this winery just outside Napa city turns heads: a minimalist, white-washed block with a window-lined tasting room. The wines are effortlessly cool, too, lower in alcohol than many other valley wines, relatively restrained and beautifully balanced. Come for a pairing experience and you'll get a handful of must-try tipples alongside a feast that beats the bland charcuterie boards of some other spots. Expect wedge salad with herbed tahini and crispy quinoa, or tender chicken with chickpeas, marinated peppers and chorizo. £136 for a wine and food pairing lunch, with four wines and five dishes. ashesdiamonds.com

BEAR
This chic yet unfussy restaurant at the new Stanly Ranch hotel is the perfect example of Napa city's growing gourmet food scene. Grab a seat on the terrace at sunset and dive into Californian ingredients given a globe-trotting dressing up: think honeynut squash with bee pollen and guajillo chilli. It's delicious and surprising in equal measure. £70 for three courses, excluding wine. aubergeresorts.com/stanlyranch

INGLENOOK
At Francis Ford Coppola's rambling wine estate, tastings are a real experience. Enter the opulent, French-inspired château and it feels like you've stepped onto a film set, with Persian rugs, lounge music and moody lighting – but then, would you expect less from the man behind *The Godfather*? The Cabernet Sauvignons are superb, but don't miss the white Rhône-style blend Blancaneaux, with Viognier, Roussanne and Marsanne. Look out for the subtle art hung in the interior, painted by Coppola himself. Heritage Tasting £49. inglenook.com

IMAGE: ASHES & DIAMONDS

Sauvignon-dominated reds fetching triple-digit prices. Multimillion-dollar wineries now line thoroughfare St Helena Highway, sometimes charging up to £82 per head for a tasting. Chic wine towns like Yountville or Calistoga are punctuated with five-star hotels.

Despite appearances, though — as Mad Fritz proves — there's more to this 30-mile-long valley than wine tourism. Even as consumer demand has pushed up the vineyard acreage, some businesses still do things differently. Farmers like Peter Jacobsen in Yountville use the land to grow organic figs, pears and rare tomato varieties. In his case, for some of California's top restaurants — including Thomas Keller's three-Michelin-starred The French Laundry.

One of Jacobsen's other clients is Philip Tessier, chef at stalwart steakhouse PRESS in St Helena. He joined in 2019 and has since transformed it into a Napa produce-focused fine dining restaurant.

"When I took over, it was all steak with Cabernet Sauvignon," he tells me in the restaurant kitchen later that evening, after the sun has set and the day's heat is on the wane. "But that's a one-dimensional programme. There's diversity and experimentation in the valley, and a tasting menu gives us the opportunity to showcase things people don't consider when they think about Napa."

The valley's unique growing seasons drive the menu. As I head towards my table for dinner, Phil says, "We get tomatoes all the way through to October and squash seven months of the year. The only challenge is deciding what to choose."

At a table on the terrace, I work through dishes with verdant pea, bright sweetcorn and basil. His signature dish, squash blossom-wrapped ricotta gnudi with parmesan consomme, is rich yet delicate. By the time I get to the white asparagus, served with American wagyu ribeye cap in an elevated homage to the restaurant's steakhouse roots, I feel like I've devoured a field's worth of fresh produce.

Next day, I head to Napa city, the valley's largest settlement, to get a sense of what's on locals' everyday menus. In contrast to the rural-ritzy tourist towns of St Helena, Yountville and Calistoga, Napa feels 'real', with busier streets, bars and affordable restaurants. And a fabulous food hall: the Oxbow Public Market.

Inside, I'm caught up in the lunchtime rush. Hot dogs topped with red onion, sauerkraut and relish are taken out onto the sun-splashed terrace for devouring. Oozy gouda and chicken paninis are smothered in jalapeño aioli. All around, stalls are brimming with sweet-smelling stone fruit, and shelves are stacked with olive oils, chocolates and spices. I'm tempted by some oysters — not from Napa, but harvested just 50 miles away — but I hold myself back; I've got other dining plans.

It's mid-afternoon when I finally arrive at Buster's Southern BBQ, a 40-minute drive up the valley in Calistoga. Open since 1965, this unassuming spot lacks pretence, dishing up lunchtime beef ribs, pulled pork and hot links from a kiosk window. As I polish off my coleslaw in the shady outdoor dining area, the trendy hot spring spas of the town's high street and its grand tasting rooms feel pretty distant.

BUSTER'S of Calistoga
Rock

Live music at Buster's Southern BBQ

It's even hotter than yesterday. That's no surprise; Calistoga is among the sultriest of Napa pockets, set in an arid corridor that feels like the Kalahari this afternoon. So, when I enter Tank Garage Winery, set inside a 1930s petrol station across the street from Buster's, the lights are off. The town's power supply has been temporarily cut to save everyone's full-blast air-con from overwhelming the electricity board.

Thankfully, it's cool in here. In more ways than one: with old gas pumps and vintage signage, Tank isn't your typical Napa winery. Gazing at the tasting list, I can see that's different, too, littered with grapes like Barbera, Trousseau Gris and Mourvèdre. There's a sparkling skin-fermented Pet Nat and even a carbonic maceration white.

"Around 93% of California is planted with the usual suspects: Cabernet, Chardonnay, Pinot Noir," South Africa-born winemaker Bertus van Zyl tells me. "But there's 7% that is oddball and super interesting. I love wines that are stylistically higher in acid, more old-world in style." In short, Tank wines aren't your traditional hefty Napa reds.

As I taste my way through the quirky range, I learn every wine is a one-off — even if grapes are sourced from the same vineyards each year, they'll never be blended or vinified in the same way twice. Innovation is the aim — so long as it's delicious, anything goes.

The La Loba white, with Petit Manseng and Bianchetta Trevigiana, is a particular favourite of mine. But the grapes don't come from Napa; Bertus sources them from El Dorado County, while the fruit for his other wines largely comes from nearby regions like Sonoma and Mendocino. Napa's high land prices mean you can't justify growing such niche grapes here; it simply doesn't make financial sense.

As the lights come back on, another challenge — apparent during my two sweltering days here — is explained to me: the reason the power is cut on hot days is because it reduces the risk of overloading the grid and, in turn, fires. Napa has already known too many of those; in 2021, devastating blazes burned through its Meadowood resort.

"We're dealing with forest fires, but also frost, record-breaking rain and flooding as well," says Bertus. Along with the other producers in Napa, he's at the frontline reacting to these effects — and recognises the need to think ahead.

Could there be any better argument for diversification in the valley? Relying on Cabernet Sauvignon means there's no Plan B. Innovation by people like Bertus — whether through hardier grape varieties or new growing locations — can provide options to face the uncertain future. "The best thing we can have in the long-run," he says, as I take my last sip of his unique wine, "is creativity." ▪

HOW TO DO IT

America As You Like It has a seven-night Northern California Wine Country and Coast itinerary from £1,219 per person, including flights, car hire and room-only accommodation. It includes stops in Napa Valley, Sonoma Valley, Mendocino and San Francisco, with accommodation in Napa at Indigo Napa Valley. americaasyoulikeit.com hotelindigonapa.com

FIVE FOOD FINDS

①

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

For new twists that balance the grape's robust tannin with fruit and freshness, try Elusa from Calistoga — a new winery with organic vineyards managed by young winemaker Jonathan Walden. Or Napa classic Chateau Montelena, which makes Cabernet aromatic with bright berry and baking spice aromas.

②

OLIVE OIL

The sun-baked Napa landscape is perfect for growing olives. Round Pond Estate in Rutherford produces oil using both Spanish and Italian varietals.

③

GOTT'S ROADSIDE CHEESEBURGER

For the best cheeseburger in Napa, pop into the St Helena or Oxbow branch of Gott's for a Niman Ranch beef patty in a toasted egg bun, topped with pickles and secret sauce.

④

TOMATOES

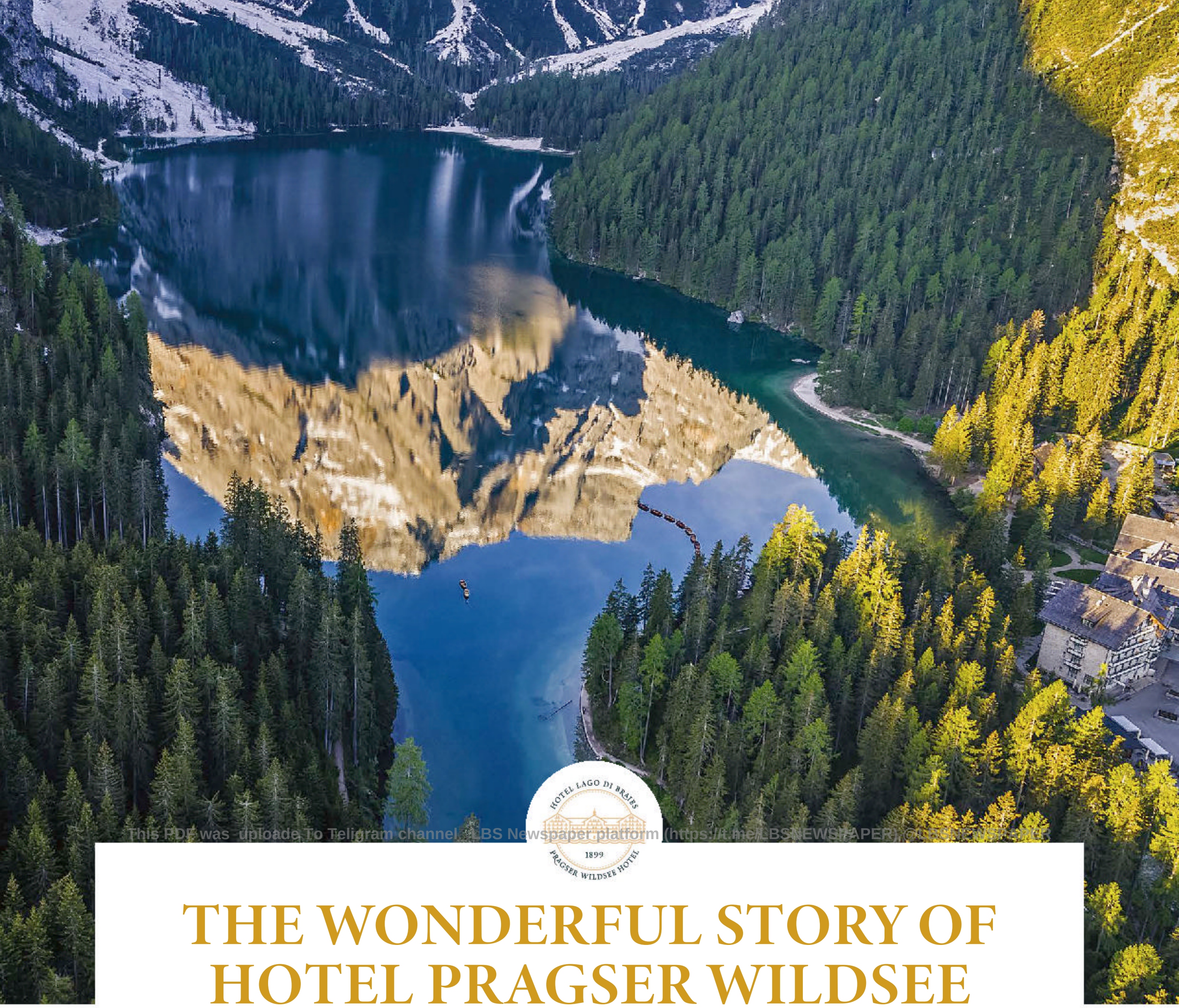
With all that sun, Napa tomatoes really are special. Look out for heirloom varieties such as the stripy bleeding heart or golden cherry Napa chardonnay on restaurant menus right into autumn.

⑤

MAD FRITZ NAPA ALE

A true reflection of the valley in a glass, with locally grown barley and hops. If you can't get this popular one, try citrussy The Peacock and Jupiter white ale.

IMAGES: BARBARA JOLLY AND ARELY MARTINEZ; BRIANA MARIE PHOTOGRAPHY



HOTEL LAGO DI BRAIES
1899
PRAGSER WILDSEE HOTEL

THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HOTEL PRAGSER WILDSEE

A hotelier wants to ease his wife's homesickness & buys a lake for her in 1856. The Pragser Wildsee is a love pledge done for Emma Hellenstainer, who has been given the most beautiful lake in the Dolomites. From then, the innkeeper led noblemen, citizens, & Alpinists on excursions to her mountain lake. But it was not until 1899 that the family built the Grandhotel Pragser Wildsee directly on the shore. It is still the only accommodation on the lake & is situated In the stunning UNESCO World Heritage site of the Dolomites.

Hotel Lago di Braies | San Vito 27 | 39030 Braies-Dolomiti | Tel. +39 0474 748602 | hotel@pragserwildsee.com

SLEEP

MEXICO CITY

Welcome to Mexico City — a fascinating and chaotic sprawl of 25 million people where lively weekend craft markets are held in leafy parks, mariachis serenade in neighbourhood plazas and the air carries the aroma of roasted corn from roaming street sellers. Once just seen as the region's gateway city, Mexico's capital has grown in popularity in recent years, and there are an increasing number of hotels in the city's trendiest locales. The historic centre has experienced a resurgence, with beautiful hotel conversions of heritage buildings. Beyond it, buzzing neighbourhoods such as Roma, Condesa and Coyoacán are where to head for stylish guesthouses.

WORDS: KATE ARMSTRONG

ALL RATES QUOTED ARE FOR STANDARD DOUBLES, ROOM-ONLY, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. IMAGES: GETTY; URIBE FOTOGRAFIA

Best for wow factor

£££ ANDAZ CONDESA

Neon-lit cacti and magenta-mirrored escalators form a striking entry to this stylish luxury hotel. It opened in January 2023 in Condesa, one of Mexico City's trendiest locales, which is known for its art deco buildings. The aesthetic flows through to the first floor where guests are greeted. Beyond this, blonde timbers form deco-esque curves, and pastel velvet-covered seating fills the in-house matcha bar. Meanwhile the 213 fresh, light-filled rooms are a complete contrast, washed in soothing whites and greys, with vinyl record players and papier-mâché figurines as novel additions to the otherwise minimalist setting. Fashionable Condesa locals like to hang out on the hotel's top-floor terrace. It offers expansive views, a swimming pool and the Cabuya Rooftop restaurant — a relaxing spot serving seafood and dishes inspired by the food of Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula.

ROOMS: From £280 per night, room only.
andazmexicocitycondesa.com

Best for design lovers

££ DURANGO 219

The exterior of this hotel is unique, built out of pink Cantera local stone. Interiors showcase a great eye for design, which is reflected in the 12 contemporary rooms, each of which has a hero feature, such as a refurbished vintage chair or unfussy sculpture. Opened in December 2022, Durango 219 is excellent value — even the smallest suites feel expansive, thanks to the neutral white, beige and grey colour palette, married with natural woods, large windows and, in some cases, a balcony. The plant-lined roof terrace bar is the ideal place to relax over a cocktail, and the hotel is located at the sweet spot between Mexico City's lively Roma and Condesa neighbourhoods, meaning guests are also close to Contramar, the ultra-popular Mexican seafood restaurant, and Rosetta, a sublime bakery-cafe.

ROOMS: From £105, room only. durango219.com

Best for soothing the soul

££ H21 HOSPEDAJE BOUTIQUE

One of the best-value hotels in Mexico City, H21 is just a short hop from Coyoacán's neighbourhood highlights (the beautiful plaza, market and Frida Kahlo's Blue House), yet feels like an oasis of calm. Built in 1928 by the owner's grandfather, it's been converted into seven unique guest rooms that respect the original house layout. This means the rooms come in different shapes and sizes, but each is tranquil and inviting. The elegant decor blends greys and beiges with quarry stone floors and distressed white woods, and there is an evident love of aesthetics reinforced by photography books and vintage figurines. A continental breakfast is supplied; you help yourself in the kitchen and enjoy it wherever you like.

ROOMS: From £150, B&B. h21.mx

Best for romantics

£££ PUG SEAL ANATOLE FRANCE

Located in the upmarket neighbourhood of Polanco, this boutique hotel, a renovated 1940s mansion, is as delightfully quirky as its name suggests. The interiors blend rococo and mid-century styles with a colour palette of rich purples and bottle greens. The 26 rooms are tastefully filled with a sophisticated and eclectic mélange of vintage furniture, which complements the contrasting wallpapers, wood panelling and massive round mirrors. The hotel also drips with contemporary art, and everywhere guests go, there's the dreamy aroma of expensive perfume. The breakfasts are superb, taken in the garden or breakfast room — just the ticket to prepare for days spent enjoying the neighbourhood's Spanish Revival architecture and fashion boutiques.

ROOMS: From £290, B&B. pugseal.com

IMAGES: JUAN CARLOS TRUEBA; PUG SEAL HOSPITALITY BOUTIQUE; CRISTIÁN ZARABOZO

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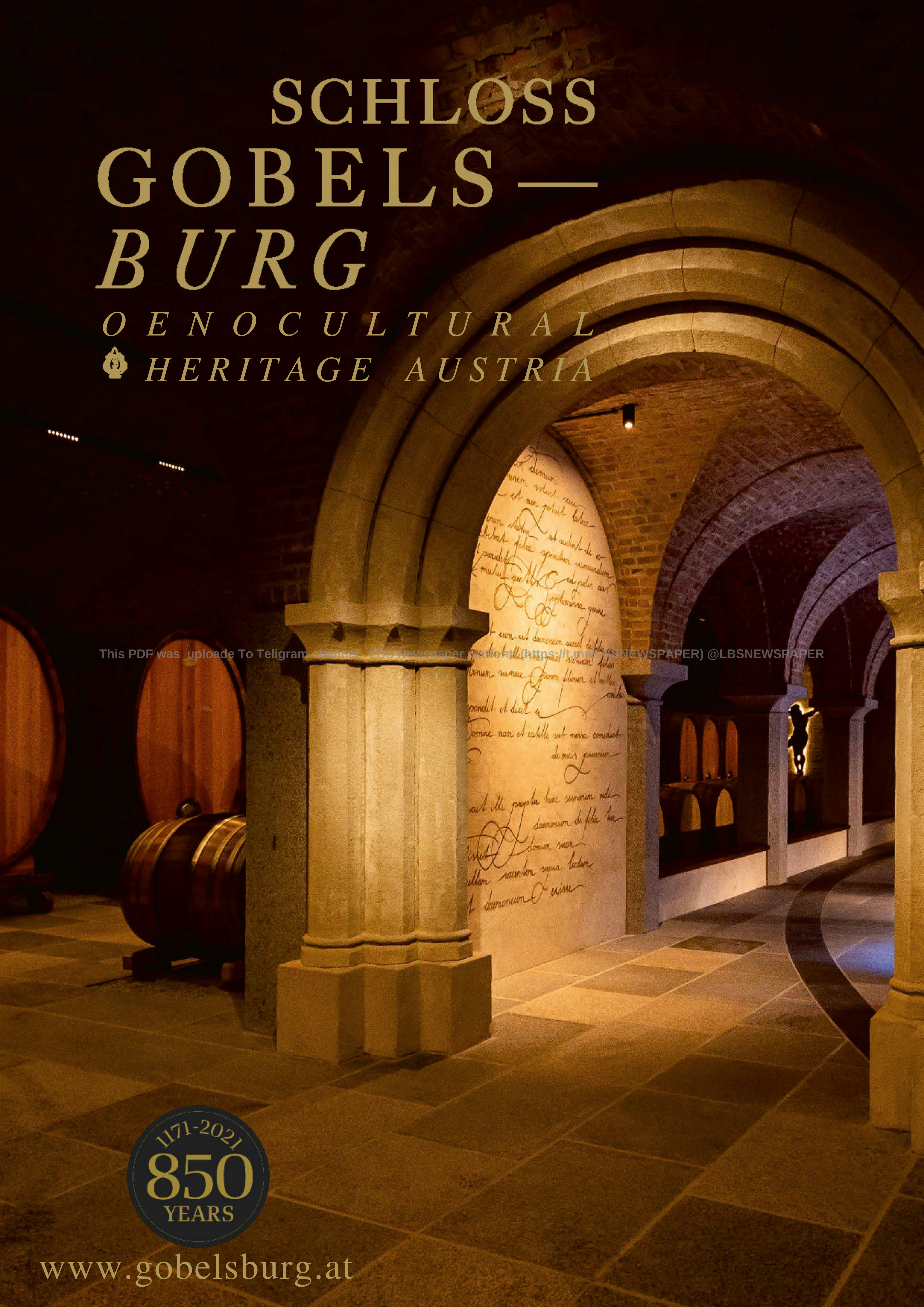
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Best for unique features

£££ UMBRAL CURIO COLLECTION

This beautifully converted 1920s office building in the centre is one of Mexico's City's most intriguing hotels. The original art deco staircase, leading up to the hotel's five levels, overlooks the centerpiece: a hollow atrium surrounded by a bank of balconies with original 1930s glass-tile floors. The rooms are designed so guests enter through a darkened vestibule, to increase the impact of the minimalist bedrooms beyond. There's a heated pool and jacuzzi on the roof, and the hotel's Nardo Cocktail Club features a piano designed to look like a giant *alebrije* (a Mexican folk art creature).

ROOMS: From £175, room only. hotelumbral.com

Best for socialising

££ THE RED TREE HOUSE

For years, hosts of this stylishly converted 1930s home have treated visitors like friends. Guests rave about feeling like they've been invited into someone's beautiful home, where the living areas are decked out with art and global travellers mingle over sociable happy hour drinks. The building's layout is labyrinthine, with 22 rooms of all shapes and sizes, and others spread around the attractive garden courtyard. There are also generously sized apartments in a separate building next door. Stand-out breakfasts include omelettes and local dishes such as *sopes* (fried corn flour shells with toppings such as onion, cheese and refried beans). The icing on the cake is the hotel's location, near Parque México in the leafy neighbourhood of Condesa.

ROOMS: From £135, B&B. theredtreehouse.com

Best for small budgets

£ HOSTEL BARRIO DOWNTOWN

This buzzing and attractive Mexican-themed central hostel opened in September 2022, spread over several floors and popping with images of comic skeletons, lucha libre wrestling masks and neon lights. It's neat and offers small, private rooms with chic shared bathrooms, as well as pod-like dorm beds with privacy dividers, each equipped with a reading light, safety box and handy storage area. The addition of several glass-walled offices (available on a 'first-in' basis) makes it popular with digital nomads. Other perks include delicious breakfasts of fruit, Mexican sweet breads and *chilaquiles* (crisp tortilla triangles topped with a salsa and other trimmings) as part of the standard rate, and a tour desk that can arrange cultural experiences or trips.

ROOMS: From £37, B&B. hostelbarrio.com

Best for solo travellers

£ CASA PEPE

Vibrant and welcoming, and located bang in the middle of the historic centre, Casa Pepe is among Mexico City's best hostels. Spread over five floors of a renovated historic building, it has dorms with neat bunks or curtained pods, as well as private rooms, with some suitable for families. The sleek co-working space is watched over by a sculpture of La Catrina, a famous personified skeleton that's often associated with Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations. There are also fabulous pop-art murals that depict Mexican luminaries including philosopher-writer José Vasconcelos, whose nickname 'Pepe' was the inspiration for the name of the hostel. The rooftop terrace keeps things lively with margaritas and regularly changing Mexican meal specials.

ROOMS: From £55, room only. casapepe.mx

IMAGE: UMBRAL, CURIO COLLECTION

Best for afternoon siestas

££ CASA TUNA

Bougainvillea and traditional *piñata* decorations greet you as you enter the gate of this sprawling property in Coyoacán. Its location is a big selling point — in a leafy street close to Frida Kahlo's Blue House and Coyoacán Market, and a short taxi ride away from the museum-house-studio of Mexican mural painter Diego Rivera. Set around a courtyard garden, the 12 guest rooms feature exposed concrete walls and tasteful artisan crafts such as palm wall hangings. The rooftop terrace is strung with hammocks and scattered with wicker chairs. Breakfasts include coffee from Oaxaca and *chilaquiles*.

ROOMS: From £120, B&B. tunacoyoacan.com

Best for local living

££ NANA VIDA

The term '*nana vida*' is an expression of pleasurable surprise in the indigenous Zapotec language and this stylish property deserves the name. It opened in the fashionable Roma district in December 2022 with 14 rooms, all of which have timber finishes and colourful furnishings. Staff provide a never-ending supply of pastries, coffee and tea that can be enjoyed on the rooftop terrace. And there's plenty for guests to do on the hotel's doorstep as it's close to the popular Madre Cafe and La Nuclear, a tavern specialising in the traditional alcoholic beverage, *pulque*.

ROOMS: From £137, room only. nanavida.com ▯

IMAGES: NANA VIDA; CASA TUNA

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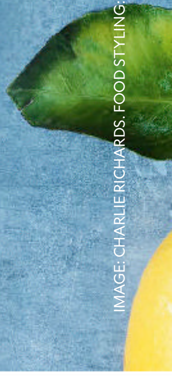

IMAGE: CHARLIE RICHARDS. FOOD STYLING: ANGELA ROMEO

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ULTIMATE

Famed for its crowd-pleasing cuisine, cypress-cloaked landscapes and elegant palazzos, Italy offers enough for a lifetime of new discoveries. From a coastal road trip through Calabria to street art tours in Turin and dining in the shadow of Mount Etna, here are 21 experiences that cast the country in a different light

IMAGES: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

ITALY

WORDS: JULIA BUCKLEY

01 TUSCAN LANDSCAPES

With ancient hill towns and mist-covered valleys lined with olive groves and vineyards, the Val d'Orcia offers the most beautiful snapshot of Tuscany

There's a very important question to be answered when you visit Pienza: is this the most beautiful town in Italy? I'm going to say yes. Staring at the view from the town walls is like looking at a painting. Unspooling below are hills in 50 shades of green, cut through by slashes of grey — unpaved roads chiselled from the clay beneath. Cypress avenues stripe the landscape, terracotta Renaissance towns cling to every peak. And the backdrop to it all? Monte Amiata, a dormant volcano gently wrapping around the landscape, as if she's gathering the valley in an embrace.

I'm not the only one who loves it. Pienza was the 'ideal city' for 15th-century Pope Pius II. Born in what used to be Corsignano, when he became pope he bulldozed his birthplace and created a perfectly proportioned Renaissance town in its stead. With its hulking palazzos and narrow alleyways, Pienza is still spectacular. It also produces one of Italy's best pecorino cheeses, but I must resist sampling it and move on — it's time to take a trip around the volcano, to absorb the best of Tuscany.

From Pienza, I drive towards Amiata, looping round the east side of the mountain. San Quirico d'Orcia is the first stop. Here, I stand in the shadows of ancient churches and walk through a ghostly Renaissance garden bound by tumble-down walls. Next, it's a climb towards the wine town of Montalcino then on to another winding road, Amiata's peak beckoning in the distance. Standing at the foot of a hill, centuries-old olive trees standing guard around it, is the Abbazia di Sant'Antimo, an abandoned medieval abbey.

From there, curling around more hills, through villages untouched by tourism, I reach Castiglione d'Orcia, a town balancing on a high crag over the Val d'Orcia. Pienza is visible in the distance across the valley, that famous landscape unravelling between us.

Moving around Amiata, everything changes. On its southeastern flank, green fields seem to split apart before my eyes. This is canyon country, where towns like Pitigliano teeter on ridges, the abyss either side, and roads plunge into deep gorges. At Sovana, an ancient Etruscan necropolis hides in the woods, sculpted winged daemons marking the graves.

My final destination lies across another set of hills, in a valley where the eggy smell of sulphur curls through the window of the car. Below Saturnia — a hilltop town so nonchalant about its history that bits of Roman buildings are lined up around the war memorial in the piazza — is a volcanic lake. Warm thermal waters gush out of the source, before cleaving a hot brook through the fields.

In Roman times, soldiers came here to bathe on the way back to Rome, soothing their battle wounds in the restorative mineral waters, which simmered for 40 years underground after settling on Amiata as raindrops. Today, Terme di Saturnia is a luxury resort, and that lake beloved by the Romans is a pool. Get in and your feet still touch the clay floor before it shelves down like a crater. Bubbles fizz up from the depths, bits of plankton bobbing on top.

I go for an evening float on arrival — it's like getting into a warm bath. The next morning, I'm first in. Steam is billowing off the water into the air and paddling into the centre is like entering a cloud. All I can see is water, and all I can hear is the spring, thundering up into the crater from Amiata. It's as if time stopped when the Romans left.

More information: In Pienza, La Bandita Townhouse, part of the Further Afield collection, has doubles from £300, B&B. Terme di Saturnia has doubles from £310, B&B. furtherafield.com la-bandita.com termedisaturnia.it visittuscany.com

Clockwise from top: A flock of sheep on the hills between Asciano and Pienza; the Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore monastery; the Cascate del Mulino waterfalls, Saturnia; wheels of Pienza's famed pecorino cheese

Previous pages from left: Lasagnette al pesto for lunch at E Prie Rosse, Genoa; view of the cliffs and the Sanctuary of Santa Maria dell'Isola, Tropea

IMAGES: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

Marina di Zambrone beach, located between the towns of Pizzo Calabro and Tropea

Opposite page, from top: View of the Castello Ruffo di Calabria, Scilla, Calabria; Mirror Gallery of the Royal Palace, Genoa

02 ITALY'S ULTIMATE **ROAD TRIP**

For Amalfi-style views without the crowds and chaos, you need to head to Calabria (the toe of Italy's boot) and the Costa Viola, or 'Violet Coast'. The name is a nod to its showstopper sunsets, which flush everything from the sky and the sea to the white-stone houses most nights. The drive itself is every bit as much of a jaw-dropper.

Start from Tropea, a pretty cliffside town on the Capo Vaticano peninsula, best known for its purply-red onions that taste as sweet as the views look. The peninsula is the knobbly bit on Italy's toe. It bulges into the Tyrrhenian Sea and has knockout coves with sandy beaches the whole way around it. Be sure to save time for an impromptu swim as you head south. Look offshore and you'll see Stromboli, the volcano-island, puffing gently into the sky.

Round the peninsula and you'll hit the main route south — take the coastal roads, not the highway, to pass through small towns and weave up and down the cliffside. Stop at Scilla, where a clifftop castle squares off against Sicily, the island looming dark across the Strait of Messina.

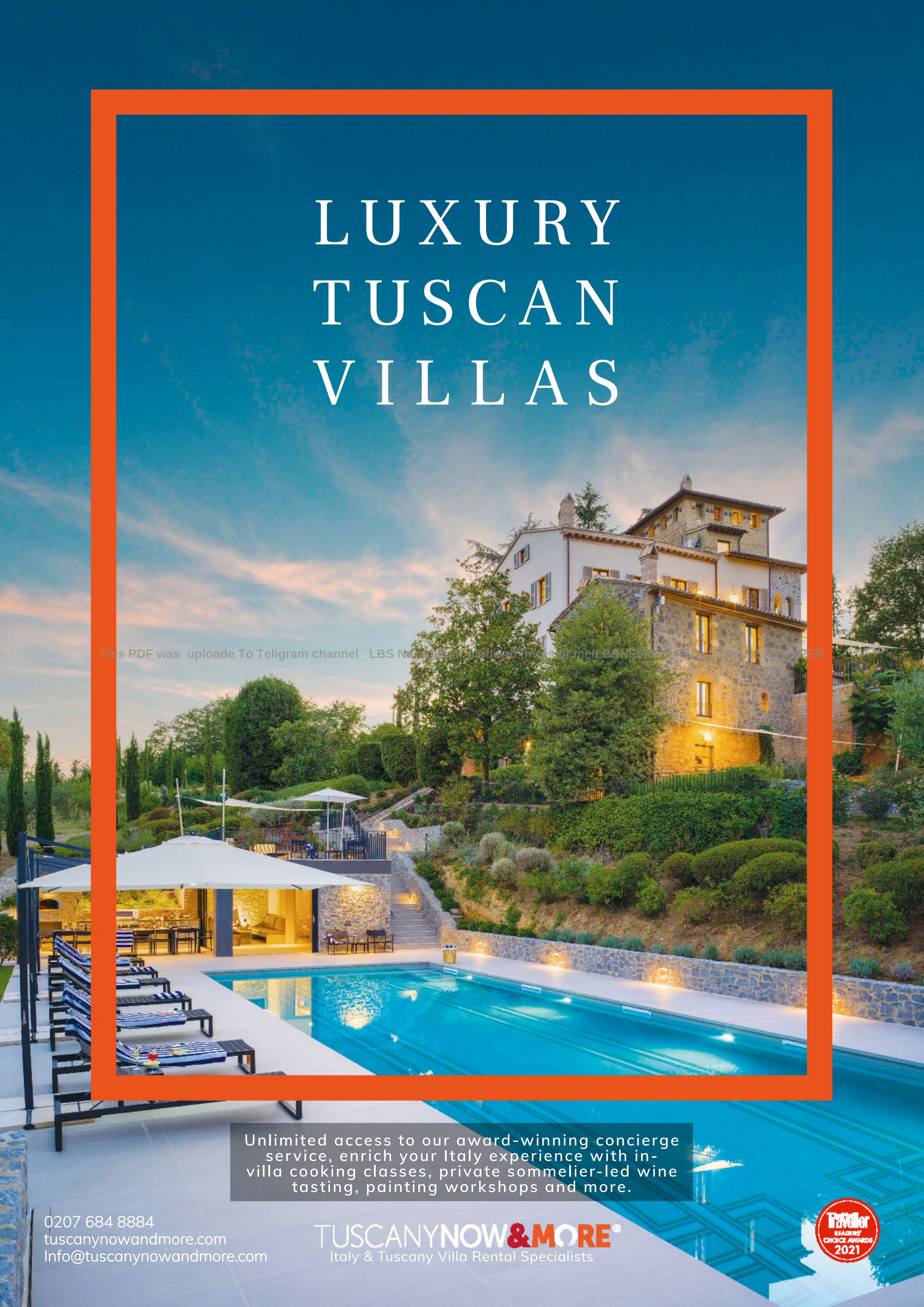
Sicily looms larger as you close in towards Reggio Calabria, the southernmost city on the Italian peninsula. Park up for a walk along the seafront promenade, one of Italy's loveliest, where Sicily seems almost within touching distance and the distinctive cone of Mount Etna broods across the water. calabriastraordinnaria.it

IMAGES: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

03 A TOUR OF GRAND **GENOA**

Move over Rome and Milan; in the 16th century, Genoa was one of the richest cities on the planet, thanks to its port. The city was effectively run by a class of oligarchs, who had more money than they knew what to do with. They poured it into building houses, creating a whole new town above the original centre. Today, what's still called the Strada Nuova ('new street') remains: a pedestrianised main drag, chiselled from the steep cliffside above the medieval old town.

This is the world of the super-rich, where the 1% of the 16th-century populace built mansions, each grander than the last, 42 of which are now UNESCO World Heritage sites. Some are still houses, though most keep their hulking doors open, allowing you to walk into the covered, frescoed courtyards where carriages once pulled up. Some are banks; one, Via Garibaldi 12, is a showstopper design shop. And three of them — Palazzos Rosso, Bianco and Tursi — operate as a scattered city museum. Don't miss the mezzanine of Palazzo Rosso, the gilded love nest of a particularly libidinous 17th-century owner, which reopened to the public in 2022. viagaribaldi12.com museidigenova.it



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Clockwise from left: View of Turin from Monte dei Cappuccini; Piazza Castello with the Palazzo Madama and Palazzo Reale

04 ONE DAY IN TURIN

9AM The Palazzo Reale (royal palace) tells the story of Turin's heyday under the house of Savoy, who made the city its capital from 1562 and the capital of the newly unified Italy in 1861. It's a fascinating museum, telling that story through coffered ceilings, damask-clad walls and rooms dripping in chandeliers. On the way out, see the Royal Armoury and whip around the peaceful, park-like gardens. museireali.beniculturali.it

11AM Drawing on the Savoy collections, the Museo Egizio is second only to Cairo in its wealth of Egyptian antiquities. Don't miss the Galleria dei Re, an avenue of behemoth statues, lit by Oscar-winning art director Dante Ferretti. Make time for the smaller details — the hieroglyphic love poetry on papyrus still hits across the centuries. museoegizio.it

1PM Tiny, marble-swathed Caffe Mulassano claims to have invented the *tramezzino* (dainty, crustless sandwich) here in 1926. UK visitors might not agree, but they'll love the goods: there are about 30 fillings to choose from, including truffle and *bagna cauda* (Piedmont's garlic and anchovy dip) and lobster. Pair it with a spritz stoked with house vermouth. The fortified wine was invented in Turin and Mulassano's version, dating to 1879, is just the ticket for a boozy lunch. caffemulassano.com

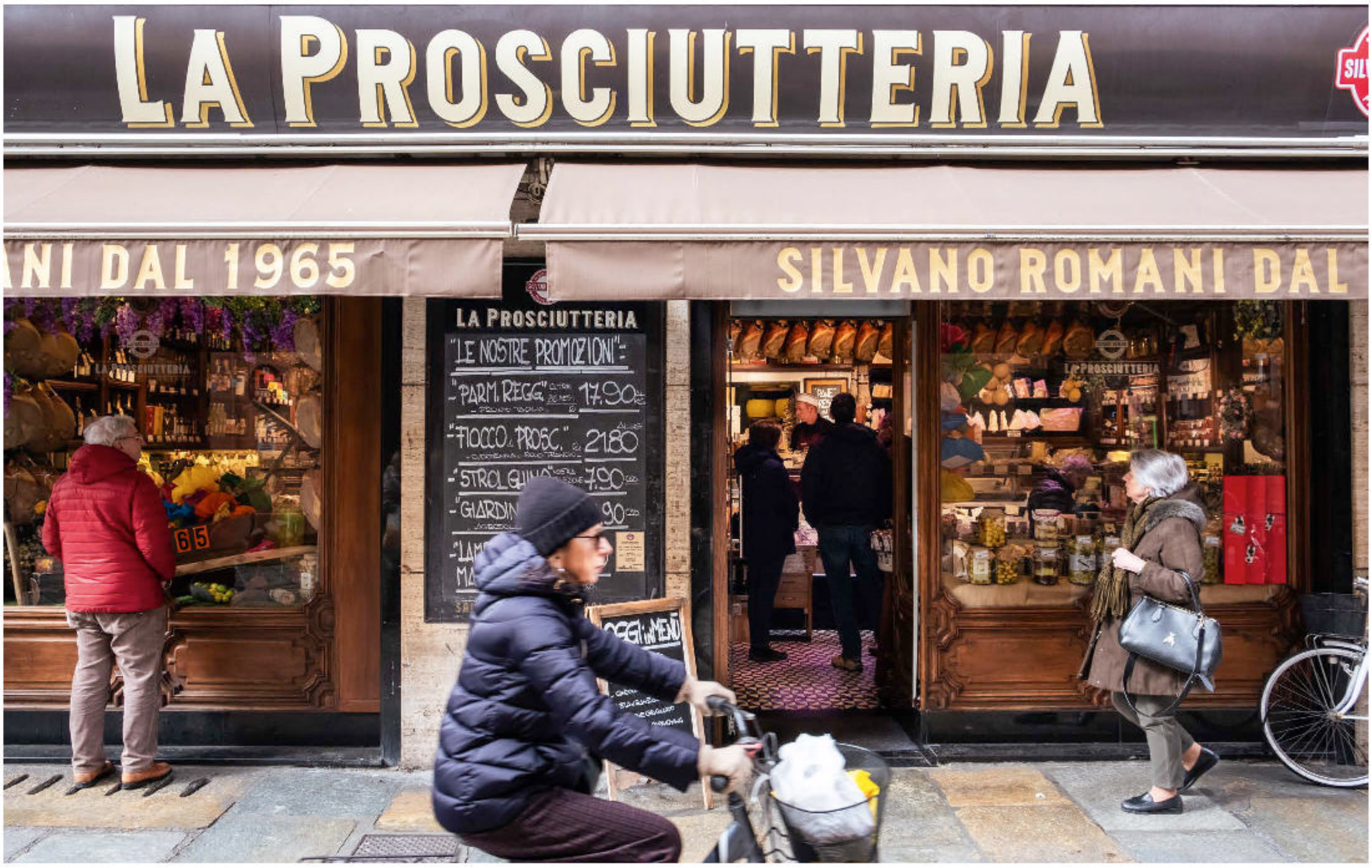
2PM Turin is a hub for street art, with various projects across the city, including the MAUA (Museo di Arte Urbana Aumentata). This open-air gallery scattered throughout Turin is an augmented reality experience — so what look at first glance like a regular artwork becomes, thanks to an app, an interactive installation. See them on a tour with Claudia Kiki of Street Art Tourino, who'll also throw in other street art areas, including the Parco Dora, an ex-industrial area that's now an urban park for street artists and taggers. mauamuseum.com facebook.com/streetarttourtorino

4PM Whip though the Museo Nazionale del Cinema — less for its (top-rung) exhibition on the history of cinema and more to clap your eyes on the building. The Mole Antonelliana is the soaring tower on the back of Italy's two-cent coin, built in the 19th century as a synagogue. Take the lift up to the viewing platform on the cupola for sweeping views of the city, as well as the Alps, which embrace it. museocinema.it

6PM Grab a beer at EDIT Brewing, an old factory turned brewery that makes everything on site. The upcycled industrial location is the perfect fit for the slick urban bar — chrome beer taps hang from the ceiling, while tables overlook floor-to-ceiling windows. editbrewing.com

8PM Time for dinner at Tre Galline, which has an interesting history — various taverns have been serving up hearty Piedmont fare on this spot for the past 500 years. Today, things are rather fancier, but the restaurant still sticks to regional basics. Try the *agnolotti* pasta, filled with three types of roasted meat and served in a gravy sauce. 3galline.it turismotorino.org

IMAGES: AWL IMAGES; ALAMY



05 PARMA THROUGH ITS FOOD

The culinary heart of Emilia Romagna offers up the finest cured ham, platters of rich, fruity cheese and a sweet with links to Napoleon

Peering through the window of La Prosciutteria is like looking at a set design. The stage: Emilia Romagna. The plot: a drama about *Italianità* — 'Italianness'. Walloping great ham hocks dangle from the ceiling. Giant wheels of cheese are stacked behind the counter. Salamis are heaped in precarious piles. And, centre stage, elderly ladies are pointing at specific legs of ham, asking for their 100g to be sliced just so.

Welcome to Parma, a city of absolute precision when it comes to food. Midway between Milan and Bologna, below the River Po, for centuries this was a major stop on the Via Emilia — the Roman road from Rimini to Piacenza. Of course, that meant the food had to be good. Maybe it was down to necessity or maybe it was the local ingredients, sourced from its incredibly fertile surrounds, but by some alchemy, Parma (and Emilia Romagna more widely) have come to represent Italian food in the minds of the world.

There's Parma ham, of course, and Parmesan cheese. Around 35 miles southeast is Modena, the home of balsamic vinegar. And below that is Bologna, famous for tortellini — delicate pasta pockets made since the Renaissance.

In Emilia Romagna, food is history — and few places teach it like Parma. While food tours are increasingly popular, they normally take place outside the city, visiting the producers of cheese, ham and *culatello*, or 'little bum' — cured ham using the rear haunch of the pig, aged in ancient cellars on the banks of the Po.

And while the food on those tours are delicious, you don't get a feel for the history that created these products in the first place. So I've come to Parma itself for a different kind of food tour — one that gives me a taste of the city.

You can tell my guide, Elisabetta Ivaldi, is Parma born and bred. Looking through the window of La Prosciutteria, she explains everything: how a pig's thigh can divide into prosciutto, *culatello* and *culaccia*; how prosciutto was made in winter here until the arrival of the fridge in 1927; how *culatello* needs humidity while prosciutto, *culaccia* and *fiocco* (yet another pork cut) need the dry air of the hills outside Parma.

There's more. How every kind of salami has a different shape and different casing so they can "breathe differently". How locals order their prosciutto: "I want this one, aged 20 months, cut from that side — thinly." She pauses only to answer a man with a burning question: "Is this where they sell the Parmesan from the red cows?" It's said to be richer, sweeter than regular Parmesan. Of course it is — and of course they sell it here.

The streets are named after the shops that were there for centuries — "They speak," says Elisabetta on Borgo

Clockwise from above: La Prosciutteria's exterior with windows on via Farini; street scene in the historic centre; Luca opening a giant wheel of Parmesan behind the counter at La Prosciutteria; The 'Principe' toasted focaccia with prosciutto crudo and melted Parmesan, served with a local red wine at Enoteca Fontana

IMAGES: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

del Salame. Even the medieval cathedral baptistery has a sculpture of a man preparing salami.

Meat and cheese have been in Parma's vocabulary since the Middle Ages, but on Strada della Repubblica we fast-forward a few centuries. Parma Violets, those lurid, lavender-coloured sweets I used to spend my pocket money on, were inspired by the real Parma violets, cultivated in the 19th century by Maria Luigia, the Duchess of Parma.

The estranged second wife of Napoleon, who ran the duchy single-handedly, Maria Luigia was a keen botanist, and made these perennial flowers Parma's signature plant. She had a perfume made from them, sparking an industrial boom. The perfume factories are long gone, but at Parma Color Viola, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it shop, Carlo Pioli, the ageing descendant of the family behind the Borsari perfumery, is determined to keep the tradition alive. With his wife, Maria Luisa, he grows violets, turning them into perfume, soap, chocolates and their own Parma Violets — real petals, encrusted in sugar.

From a duchess to a prince: Elisabetta's parting gift is introducing me to Il Principe at Enoteca Fontana, an old-school wine bar. A toasted focaccia layered with prosciutto and slabs of Parmesan, and served with a sparkling local *Malvasia* to strip the fat from the tongue, it's the ultimate snack — indeed, the prince of toasties.

"Food is our history, our identity," says Elisabetta approvingly. "Food is Parma." Between bites, all I can manage is "*grazie*".

How to do it: Kirker Holidays have three nights B&B at the Sina Maria Luigia hotel from £698pp including flights and transfers. kirkerholidays.com. Elisabetta Ivaldi has half-day tours from £97. conosciparma.it

06 MOUNTAIN CULTURE Q&A

What is a *rifugio*? A 'refuge' or mountain hut, high up in the Alps or Dolomites. Situated along hiking trails, they're inns or hostels with overnight accommodation, which varies from simple to designer-luxe. They're reached either on foot or, sometimes, by ski lift or gondola

How about a *malga*? Malga is an alpine meadow, where cattle and other animals graze during the summer, before going to lower ground for the winter. In the past, the herd was overseen by a *malgaro* (shepherd), with the milk processed into butter and cheese in the *casera*. Today, many malga are open to visitors, with little farm shops and restaurants selling their products.

Where should I start? Rifugio Gardenacia, in Alta Badia, is a simple but comfortable *rifugio* — rest your weary legs on arrival in the sauna overlooking the mountains. For a first *malga* trip, El Brite de Larieto in Cortina is ideal; it's in the hills outside Cortina and is accessible by car as well as on foot. The homestead of the Gaspari family, who run the Michelin-starred SanBrite restaurant closer to town, it offers an exceptional farm-to-table experience, with cheese and meats from its own farm, veg from nearby farms, and homemade pasta. gardenacia.it elbritedelarieto.com

07 ROMAN AOSTA

After Rome, what's the city with the most Roman ruins still visible? You may be surprised by the answer: Aosta, capital of the Valle d'Aosta autonomous region. Wedged between mountains nearly 600 metres above sea level, the 'Rome of the Alps' has a wealth of ancient remains, starting with the Porta Praetoria, the old city entrance.

The Teatro Romano, or theatre, is another knockout: its semicircle block of seating, which would have held up to 4,000 spectators, is dwarfed by the four-storey facade behind it, its arched windows framing mountain peaks beyond. There are glorious crumbling sections of city walls and medieval towers, upcycled from the 20 Roman ones that wreathed the city entrances.

Near the monumental Arch of Augustus is the cobbled Ponte di Pietra, or 'bridge of stone'. Today it stands humped over grass in a small park, after the Buthier river changed course during the Middle Ages.

And Aosta doesn't lay out all its treasures at first glance. Below the cathedral is the Criptoportico Forense, a mysterious tunnel held up by immense travertine arches, which once connected the holy temple area to the forum. lovevda.it

Clockwise from above: Snow-capped Dolomites; the lagoon island of Burano; The Resurrection, hanging at the Museo Civico

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY

08 ALTERNATIVE **VENICE**

Can you really know Venice if you don't know her lagoon? That's the question posed by enterprising fishermen on Burano, the island known for its candy-coloured houses, 40 minutes north of the city centre.

Burano's fishing history dates back to Roman times, and it was one of the first settlements in the lagoon in the early Middle Ages. For centuries, the Buranelli (as the islanders are called) have been sailing out to net fish and clip herbs from the mudflats, ready to pop into the evening's risotto.

Several fishermen on the island now take visitors out to explore the lagoon. One is Andrea Rossi, who welcomes you on to his little fishing boat and inducts you into his world.

And what a world — as far from the frothy architecture of Venice as you can get. The north lagoon is a landscape of still waters and long-abandoned islands, where herbs grow beside ruined buildings, and pink flamingos stalk through the shallow waters.

He'll point out the curved-beaked ibises swooping overhead, the hawks darting towards their prey, and the thousands of wooden stakes lined up along the mudflats — used in centuries-old fishing techniques. This area is where Venice began — and it gives you a new appreciation for the magical city. venicebirdwatching.com

09 UNDISCOVERED **ART COUNTRY**

Overdosed on Renaissance art around Tuscany? It's time to head east, to the Valtiberina, or Tiber Valley — a border country between Tuscany and Umbria that rolls out below the Apennine mountains. Here, the mighty Tiber river is a mountain stream just setting out: a less showy cradle of art.

Sansepolcro, on the border, is the home of Renaissance star Piero della Francesca, whose precise works are imbued with a Da Vinci-like intrigue. His Resurrection fresco, in situ in the old governors' meeting hall (now the Museo Civico), was dubbed the world's greatest artwork by Aldous Huxley. Fifteen minutes south in Monterchi is his Madonna del Parto — a Madonna, whose earthy humanity is perhaps related to the fact Piero's own mother lived in the village.

Valtiberina doesn't just have one superstar. Citerna, is home to a brightly painted terracotta Madonna and Child by Donatello — a 'lost' work, it was only identified in 2004. Further north, in the mountain foothills, is Caprese Michelangelo, where one Michelangelo Buonarotti was born. His simple birthplace is still the centre of the hamlet — it's paired with a cast gallery of his most famous works. museocivicosansepolcro.it donatelloaciterna.it casanatalemichelangelo.it

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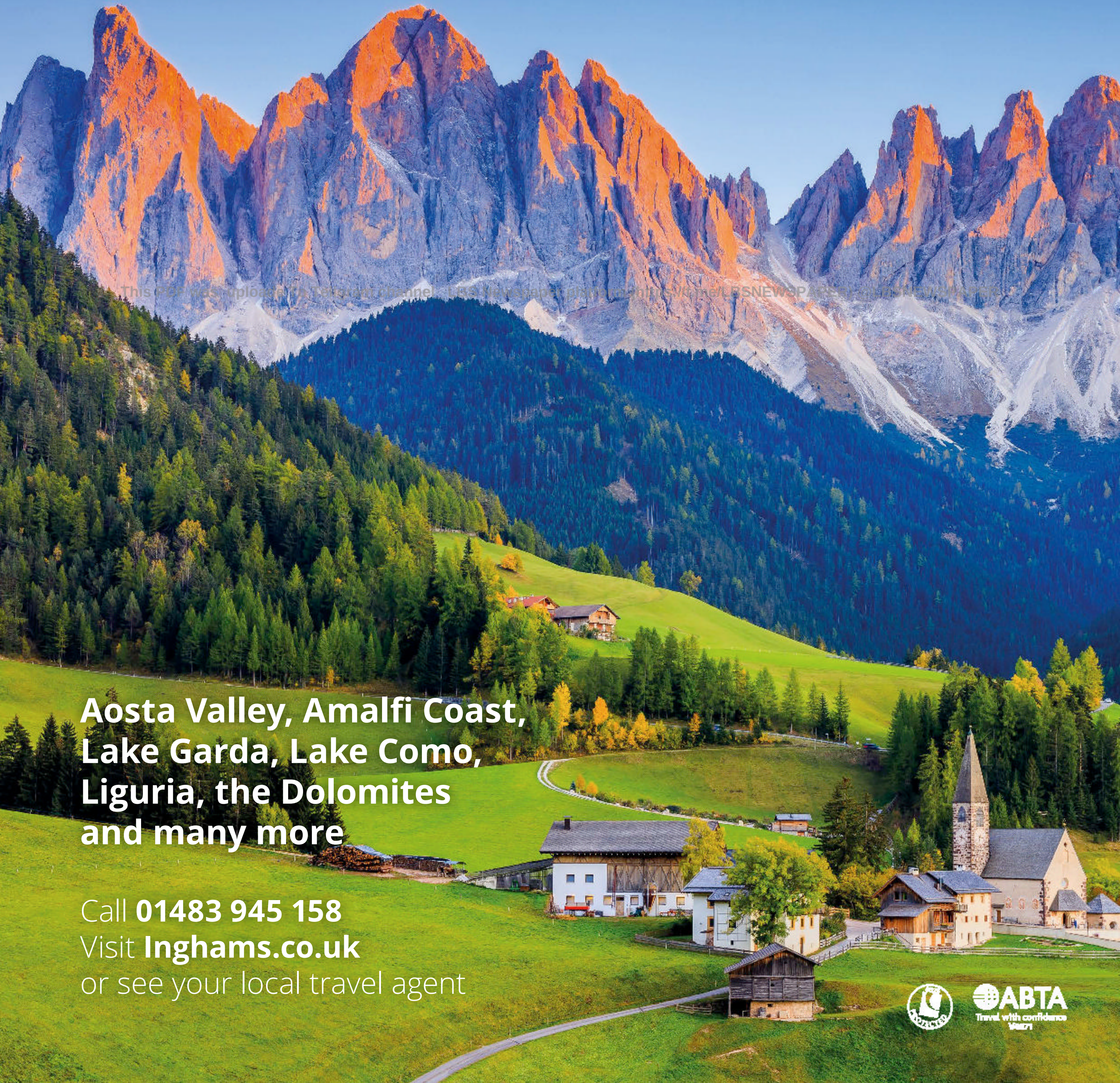

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10 SPOTLIGHT ON **BRESCIA**

Ancient Roman monuments, new art hotels and boundary-pushing pizzerias make Brescia a worthy capital of culture

Unusually, Italy has two capitals of culture in 2023: Bergamo and Brescia, sharing the spotlight after their devastating 2020, when the pair were Italy's early pandemic hotspots.

Bergamo is better known — its beautiful Città Alta, or upper town, cantilevered above the Po Valley, has been a tourist fixture for the past couple of decades. That makes lesser-known Brescia your priority for this year — and this astonishing city may just surprise you. It has incredible Roman remains, one of northern Italy's best museums, and a boundary-pushing food and drink scene. Plus it's a mere 36 minutes by train from Milan. A new 50-mile cycle route via Lake Iseo connects it with Bergamo, too, should you wish to combine the two.

The Capital of Culture events programme is heavily focused towards Italians, but you might want to skip the official events and just see the city. Start at the beginning. Brescia was founded by the Celts, who settled at the foot of the Cidneo Hill. They later allied themselves with the Romans — before becoming Roman themselves. And it's the Roman city, built by the Emperor Vespasian, that should be first on your list. Today a huge, inclined square sits over the old Forum, topped by the Capitolium — a vast, three-chapel temple, framed by gargantuan columns.

The highlight inside is the Vittoria Alata — a super-sized bronze statue of a Winged Victory so lifelike that she looks like she could take off any moment. And there's a highlight underground too: a chapel of an earlier Roman temple, still brightly frescoed with lifelike *trompe l'oeil* garlands.

Beside the Capitolium stands an enormous (if ramshackle) Roman theatre, and just down the street is the Santa Giulia Museum, set in a rambling old monastery complex which dates back to the eighth century. Tracing the history of the city from prehistory to today, it's a marathon of polished bronzes, Roman mosaics and the frescoed, starry-roofed church of Santa Maria in Solario.

But Brescia isn't just about its history — a wealthy, industrial city, it's also a top purveyor of *dolce vita*. Take Inedito, for example — a pizzeria, but not just any old pizzeria. Opened in 2021, it serves a seven-course tasting menu, including focaccia topped with *burrata* and prosciutto that's been aged for a whopping 50 months.

Then there's Massenzio, a cocktail bar down a medieval alley near the Capitolium. Fittingly, it's Roman-themed — you can try a flight of cocktails, each named after ancient emperors and empresses.

And near the station, the AreaDocks Boutique Hotel is the heart of a converted railway warehouse, along with restaurants, bars and design boutiques.

Prefer something more classic? Take a seat at one of the many bars in Piazza della Loggia, a square flanked by Venetian-built porticos, and try a *pirlo* — Brescia's take on a spritz, with Campari and white wine. bresciamusei.com ineditopizzeria.it areadocks.it

From left: Rhino statue, a contemporary art installation by artist Stefano Bombardieri in the porticos of Piazza Vittoria (it will be there until end of 2024); chef Davide preparing Inedito's prosciutto-topped focaccia; the Capitolium of Brixia, once the main temple in Roman Brescia

IMAGES: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

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SAINT HUBERTUS
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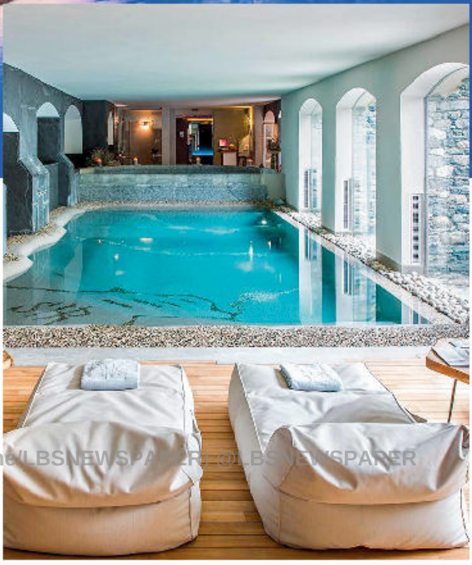

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11 WILD WILD **EAST**

Visitors flock to Puglia for its round trullo cottages, its *masseria* farmhouse hotels, and the languid Salento peninsula. But head north from Bari, instead of south as many usually do, and you'll find the wild Gargano peninsula. The spur of Italy's boot, around 100 miles up the coast, it's a land of mountains, dramatic highlands, medieval towns and some of Italy's finest beaches. Here are the highlights.

Monte Sant'Angelo
On the southern coast, teetering around 800 metres above sea level, this medieval, whitewashed town has been a place of pilgrimage for 1,500 years. The archangel Michael is said to have appeared here, and the resulting Santuario di San Michele Archangelo is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its multiple layered buildings leading down to a grotto shrine. santuariosanmichele.it

Vieste
This gorgeous fishing town is bordered by thick sandy strips of beach. Don't miss Spiaggia del Castello (also known as Scialara), where the beach is dominated by a blinding-white 80ft spear of rock called Pizzomunno.

Peschici
Topped by a Norman castle, with whitewashed houses spilling down the cliffside, this is another glorious beach town. Enter through the medieval walls to wander the historic centre.

Foresta Umbra
The green lung of the Gargano National Park, this 25,000-acre, centuries-old forest has hiking trails and the Laghetto d'Umbra, a charming little lake, where turtles swim and deer graze nearby. parcogargano.it

Tremiti islands
Boats from Vieste whisk you from Gargano to the Tremiti archipelago of five tiny islands. Scuba divers can nose around a Roman wreck off Capraia while swimmers will want a boat tour to Cretaccio (more of a rocky outcrop than an island) for an afternoon dip. Don't miss San Domino, the largest island, where you can trek through pine forest and *macchia mediterranea* — the wild herb-filled maquis that covers the island. parcogargano.it

The Tremiti Islands, an archipelago made up of five islands

Below: Foresta Umbra in Gargano National Park, Puglia

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12 HONOURING **MAMMA ETNA**

The foothills of Mount Etna are the source of Sicily's highest-quality produce, carefully crafted into the finest food and wine by local makers

It's closing time at the gelateria, but Giovanna Musumeci is waiting patiently as I pick the flavour to crown my cone. It's a tricky choice: will it be pistachio from nearby Bronte? Yellow raspberries, grown on the slopes of Mount Etna? Or local walnuts, toasted in their shells by Giovanna?

In the end, I opt for the triumvirate of Sicilian ingredients. Oro Verde della Sicilia (Sicilian Green Gold) is an award-winning mix of pistachio, mandarin and caramelised almonds. It's fresh and tangy but with a creamy base.

The tasting isn't over. Giovanna and sister Sandra want to introduce me to something even better than gelato. At Santo Musumeci — the gelateria founded by their late father — they're known for their granita: shaved ice swirled with fruit. Figs, raspberries, prickly pears, those yellow raspberries and creamy toasted almonds — I try them all.

Here, in the shadow of Mount Etna, things hit differently. People are warmer, flavours are more pronounced, the landscape is more dramatic. Opposite Giovanna's gelateria in Randazzo stands a gothic church built of dark volcanic stone. Rearing up above an alleyway is Etna herself. To Giovanna, she's "mamma Etna". The Musumeci family has always sourced their ingredients from producers working on the slopes of what Sicilians call 'idda' — simply, 'her'. "Turning fresh fruit into gelato is a real responsibility — not just to the producers, but to Etna herself," says Giovanna with some seriousness.

She's not alone. All around the volcano, Mamma Etna's charges are using her fertile land to produce things to make a mother proud. Santo Musumeci's gelato has won countless awards. Foodies flock to nearby Linguaglossa, where the Pennisi family of butchers has a Michelin-starred restaurant, Shalai, in their hotel of the same name. At Dai Pennisi, a tiny trattoria inside their butcher's shop, I tackle a *salsiccia al ceppo* — a giant sausage, prepared on a slice of Etnean oak and spiced with wild fennel plucked from the volcano side. It's a product of the Slow Food organisation's 'Ark of Taste' — a list of at-risk regional heritage foods. Coiled like a snail and grilled, it's a match for any fancy meal served in Shalai.

Tourists to Sicily used to stick to the coast, but these days, magnetic Etna pulls them towards her. At Cottanera vineyard, on the volcano's northern flank, I get another taste of what they come for. In a jeep that hurtles up and down rocky hills, agronomist Davide Cavallaro shows me the effort that goes into producing a bottle of Etna Rosso, a fierce red dubbed Italy's 'sexiest wine' by Vinitaly, a prestigious wine fair. Dust blowing back in our faces, we screech to a halt by dry-stone wall terraces, where men are clearing weeds between the vines with hand-held motorised hoes.

That's as mechanised as agriculture gets on Etna, whose prickly slopes are studded with intractable lava flows and boulders flung out from her core. There are no easy farming hacks here. A typical Italian vine yields six to seven kilos of grapes per year; on Etna, they're lucky if they manage two. So why do they still do it? "It's intrinsic to our culture," says Davide with a shrug. "She's mamma. She's inseparable from us, and she's alive."

As are her wines. It's only by doing a vineyard crawl that you notice just how much the volcano governs the taste of what emerges from her. At Cottanera, they're earthy — just like the moisture-heavy soil that Davide describes as "fat". Yet on Etna's southeast side, on a near-sheer hill above Catania, Seby Costanzo's red wine is lip-smackingly salty — thanks to the sea air rising up the mountainside.

Near Seby's vineyard, Cantine di Nessuno, is Monaci delle Terre Nere, an *agriturismo* where owner Guido Coffa has scattered the rooms amid 60 acres of orchards, wildflower meadows and still more vines. "I'm not the owner — I'm a servant of the land," he tells me, as we sit in the garden, watching the Med sparkle below. Above us, Mamma Etna puffs her approval. santomusumeci.it daipennisi.it cottanera.it cantinadinessuno.it

How to do it: Cognoscenti Travel offers a five-day Etna Wineries itinerary from £1,985 per person, including flights, car hire, wine tastings, Etna hikes, a half-day private boat trip and accommodation at Monaci delle Terre Nere and Shalai Resort. cognoscentitravel.com

Clockwise from top left: Vineyard near Castiglione della Sicilia with Mount Etna in the background; locals are proud of their Sicily-made products; an alleyway in the medieval old town of Randazzo; making ravioli in a cooking class at Monaci delle Terre Nere, on the slopes of Mount Etna

IMAGES: AWL IMAGES; ALAMY

13 THE BEARS OF **ABRUZZO**

Italy's oldest national park is home to one of the world's most endangered species: the Marsican brown bear, also known as the Apennine brown. Thanks to a sustained conservation effort, around 50 of them live in the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo, Lazio e Molise — Abruzzo's 194sq mile national park that spills over into the two neighbouring regions.

Happily, tourism helps protect the park and the bears. Take a six-hour 'Bearwatching in Abruzzo' tour (£31) with Wildlife Adventures, run by local guides from the park's Pescasseroli headquarters, and they'll donate 5% to a bear conservation charity. At twilight, between April and September, you'll hike for two hours into the mountains and to the observation area — where, hopefully, you might spot the reclusive locals. Even if you don't, you'll hear all about local conservation efforts. The five-day 'Big Five' itinerary (£496) looks for bears, wolves, boars, deer and the Apennine chamois. parcoabruzzo.it wildlifeadventures.it

14 **CAVE** TOWNS

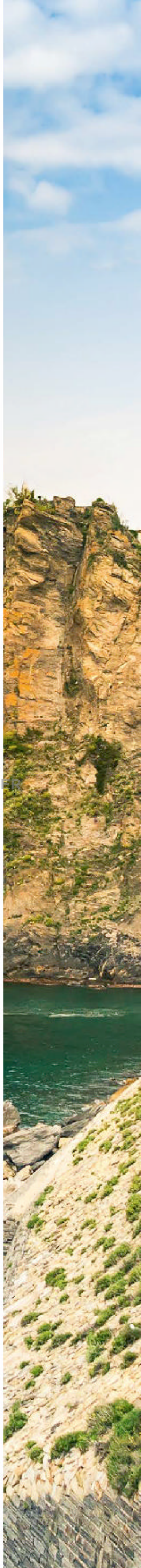
Even if you've never been, you've likely seen Matera, the 'cave city' in Basilicata, where the houses are sculpted from the cliffside. Set on the edge of a canyon and with its *sassi* (cave houses) barely touched since they were abandoned in the 1950s, it's one of Italy's most evocative places.

Matera isn't the only one though. Some 16 miles northwest, across the border in Puglia, Gravina's ancient cave homes are dug into the rock face. Its two sides are connected by the Ponte Acquedotto, a bridge strung across the abyss. You'll know it by sight, if not by name — Daniel Craig flung himself off it in the opening sequence of *No Time To Die*.

Mottola, about 30 miles southeast of Matera, is known for its cave churches. Just outside the hilltop town are canyons, where medieval worshippers carved columns and altars out of the cliffside, then frescoed them like any other church. Nearby Massafra is known as 'Italy's hermitage' thanks to the cave dwellings sculpted from its canyon sides, with the modern city sitting on top.

View across the valley from one of Matera's famous caves

Right: Manarola railway station on the Genoa-Pisa railway



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15 LIGURIA BY TRAIN

Five stops for the ultimate ride on the Genoa-Pisa line

Nervi
Heading east from Genoa, stop at this grand suburb of belle epoque villas. Today, the seafront gardens of old mansions have been turned into a sprawling seaside park.

Camogli
Twenty minutes east is this fishing village, a favourite of weekending Milanese. The joy of Camogli is that there's no real sightseeing, leaving you more time for dolce vita strolling. Meander around the little harbour, see the 12th-century church and climb up to the medieval fortress of Castel Dragone. Go on the first Sunday of August for its Stella Maris festival, when locals float thousands of candles in the water.

Sestri Levante
Half an hour onwards is Sestri Levante, a little peninsula with beaches on both sides. Wander the medieval centre and don't miss the Romanesque church of San Nicolò dell'Isola, surrounded by pines and cypresses.

Levanto
Just 14 minutes more on a fast train (33 on a slower one), and you'll arrive at Levanto. It's a large town but with a breathtaking old town. It roller coasters up and down the cliffsides, its medieval alleyways full of grand Renaissance palazzos.

Cinque Terre
From here, you're in the Cinque Terre — five photogenic villages wedged into the near-vertical cliffsides. Trains roll through all five of them — don't miss Manarola, where you walk through a cliff-drilled tunnel into the village, and a pathway leads you around the headland for the best views.

Emilio Vedova al lavoro alla breccia *Non Dove* 1985/'88 - IV (op. 7 - op. 8), 1988
Ph. Aurelio Amendola, Pistoia

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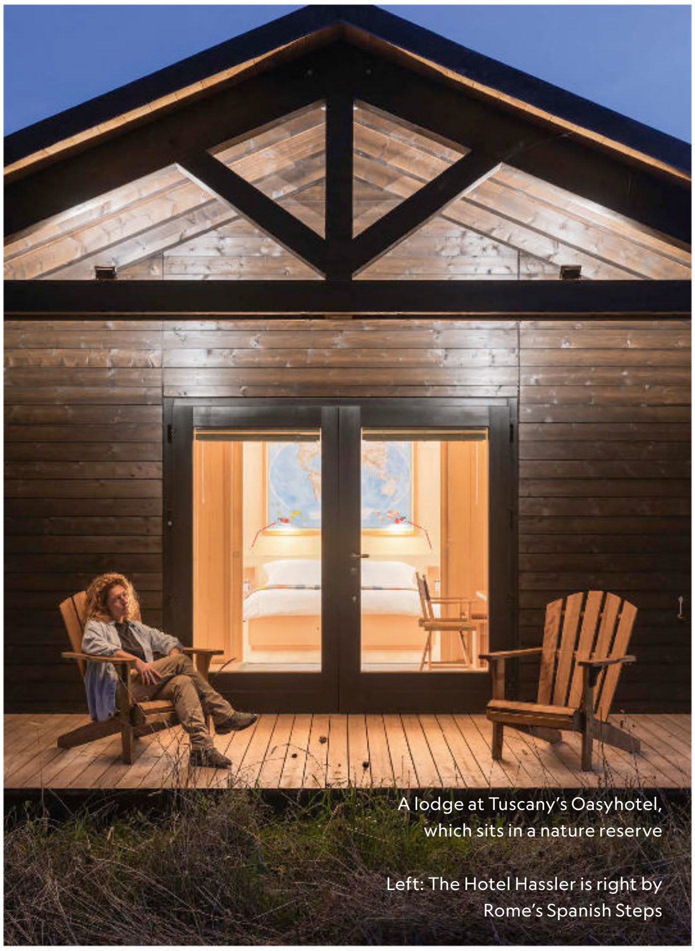

A lodge at Tuscany's Oasyhotel, which sits in a nature reserve

Left: The Hotel Hassler is right by Rome's Spanish Steps

16 UNFORGETTABLE STAYS

From the city to the countryside, Italy has dozens of iconic hotels. Here's our pick of the big-hitters worth the splurge

Villa d'Este, Lake Como
Accommodation on Como doesn't get better than this huge palace, built for a Catholic cardinal, lived in by a Queen of England, and now celebrating its 151st anniversary as a hotel. Packed full of art, and with rambling gardens dating back to the Renaissance, it's the lake's worthy grande dame. Open the windows of your huge bedroom, listen to the water lapping at the shore and relax. From £1,150, B&B. villadeste.com

Hotel Hassler, Rome
Swaggering at the top of the Spanish Steps, the Hassler is synonymous with the Eternal City. From here you can see Roman remains, gawp at the dome of St Peter's, see inside the famous Trinità dei Monti church and drink in the Dolce Vita at the hotel's jaw-dropping rooftop terrace. This is one of the few family-owned five-stars left in Rome — and it's at the absolute top of its game. From £750, room only. hotelhasslerroma.com

Sextantio Santo Stefano di Sessanio, Abruzzo
Yes it's out of the way — half an hour outside L'Aquila in the mountains of Abruzzo — but that just means you have to stay longer in this medieval village that doubles as a 'scattered hotel', with former peasant cottages turned into rooms. Luxury here hits different — everything is faithful to how farmers slept (though still wildly comfortable), and everything on the menu is hyper-local. From £186, B&B. sextantio.it

Forestis, Dolomites
Teetering on a hillside in the Dolomites, and squaring off against those toothy peaks on the other side of the valley, are three modern tower blocks: glass-fronted, clad in wood and with balconies facing the void. This is Forestis, where the spa treatments are tree-based, the yoga is Celtic-influenced and dinner puts those peaks centre stage in an amphitheatre-like restaurant. From £549 per room, half board. forestis.it

Galleria Vik, Milan
The Rodin sculpture in the lobby is the first clue that this is a rather special hotel. The second is the view from (most of) the rooms, straight into the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan's iconic 19th-century shopping arcade beside the Duomo. Book one with a balcony and you'll be suspended over the tourists taking photos, and the Milanese on their daily *passeggiata* (stroll). A modern classic in a historic setting. From £440, B&B. galleriavikmilano.com

Oasyhotel, Tuscany
This hotel, in a nature reserve north of Pistoia, lets you enjoy Italy's wilderness to the full. Its timber-framed lodges sit in grounds where you can wildlife-spot, go for a spin through the woods on an e-bike or take a turn on the lake. It's largely self-sufficient, thanks to an on-site farm, with its produce, from pork to apples, appearing on its restaurant menus. If you tire of nature, check out the hotel's art gallery, cinema and spa. From £422, B&B. oasyhotel.com

IMAGES: TOMMYPICONE/HOTEL HASSLER; NICOLA NERI

Goats crossing a paved section of Rome's Appian Way, in front of the Mausoleo Circolare

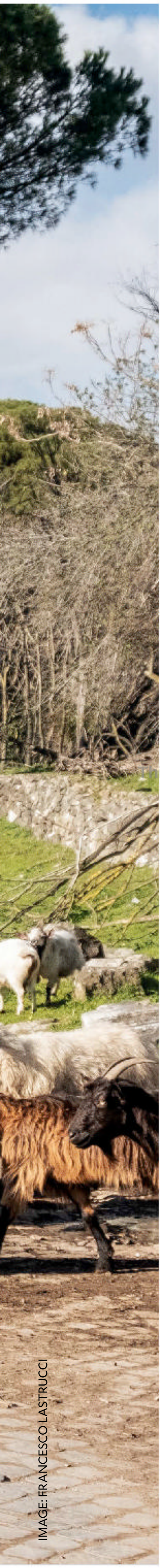
IMAGE: FRANCESCO LASTRUCCI

17 WALKING THE APPIAN WAY

In the southern suburbs of Rome, it's possible to walk along ancient cobbles in the footsteps of Roman gladiators, imperious noblewoman and the stars of *La Dolce Vita*

The woman across the street is glaring at me. Maybe it's because I'm staring at her. Maybe it's because I'm scruffy — jeans and a messy ponytail compared to her perfect hair and clothes that are the epitome of Italian chic. Or maybe it's because that striking gaze — one that says, 'Who do you think you are?' — is her pathway to immortality.

It's one that's served her well for nearly 2,000 years. In around the year 40 AD, Lucia Rabiria Demaris was sculpted like this for her tombstone. A bas relief, she hovers above the Appian Way next to her husband, whose furrowed brow and pursed lips give him a quizzical air. Little is known about the pair, who are thought to be freed slaves.

They're replicas — the originals sit in the museum of Palazzo Massimo delle Terme in central Rome. And they're nothing special, really — walk along the Via Appia Antica, or Appian Way, and you'll come face to face with the past at every step. Running southeast to Brindisi, the 360-mile road was begun in 312 to connect Rome to the eastern reaches of its empire. Though much of it has been covered up over the centuries, an 11-mile stretch remains as the Parco Archeologico dell'Appia Antica, leading from the imposing gateway of the Porta San Sebastiano in the southern suburbs of Rome. You can still walk the original road, over Roman basalt paving stones, the grooves worn by carriage wheels still visible beneath your feet. Graves had to be outside the city walls in ancient times and the many tombs that were built along the Appian Way still stand.

You don't have to walk the whole stretch to get a feel for it — those basalt stones are tough on the feet, after all. I manage 2.5 miles in a day, making slow progress as there's so much to see. I start at the Catacombs of St Sebastian. Rome's famous for its subterranean tombs, sculpted from the soft rock, and here, below the church of the same name, There's a labyrinth of low tunnels to navigate, with coffin-shaped slots and mausoleums housing earlier cremations, their facades carved to look like houses. Upstairs, near the relics of the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian, is the last work of 17th-century sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini — a wild-haired bust of Jesus in milk-white marble.

That's the lure of the Appia Antica — it's a space where time seems to melt. You're wandering through Ancient Rome, but here's Bernini, a burst of baroque. Southwards, past the villa of fourth-century Emperor Maxentius, is the medieval Castrum Caetani, a fortified hamlet. It's wrapped around the mausoleum of Cecilia Metella — a Roman noblewoman from the first century BC, whose tomb stands 35ft high, clad in gleaming travertine limestone.

Further on, another era emerges. Walking past tombs, I hear the tinkle of bells. It's sheep, the bells around their necks clanking as they graze in the neighbouring field. Now it's the 1960s — this is where Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita* drives through a flock of sheep, pursued by journalists. Nearby, the gateway to a modern villa hides behind a squat mausoleum. The recycling bins sit neatly beside the dead.

Further on, as I stumble on basalt slabs beneath tall umbrella pine trees, I pass what looks like a temple, its marble columns setting the stage for the brick building behind it. In fact, it's a *nymphaeum* — a fancy water feature belonging to the Emperor Commodus. Behind it's the emperor's Villa dei Quintili. I walk through a field that was once a stadium to explore the ruins, wandering through corridors and past a little amphitheatre where Commodus once trained gladiators. It's my last stop — as I climb down the hill, the sun is setting behind the arches of the villa.

Returning to the suburbs, it's like suddenly being back in the 21st century. Cars roar past on a dual carriageway, and a bus waits at a stop where another stylish Roman woman looks me up and down as we climb onboard. I think of Lucia Rabiria Demanis and smile as she glares.

How to do it: The Appian Way is free to walk; entry to the park sites costs £7 and the catacombs cost £8.80. Citalia has three nights B&B at the Hotel Nazionale from £650 per person, including flights with ITA Airways from Heathrow and transfers. Understanding Rome has private Appian Way tours from £263 for three hours.
citalia.com parcoarcheologicoappiaantica.it
catacombe.org understandingrome.com

18 HANDS-ON **FOOD AND DRINK**

Take a culinary journey through Italy, from the lemon groves of the Amalfi Coast to the vineyards of the Dolomites

Olive oil tasting in Puglia

Puglia produces more olive oil than anywhere else in Italy, and Pietro D'Amico is one of the region's oil wizards. He coaxes it out of olives from centuries-old, organically grown trees — sometimes pressing it, sometimes simply letting the oil rise to the top and spooning it off. During a tour, Pietro will show you round the press, explaining how they make the oil using both traditional methods and a modern production line, and then take you for a tasting in a typical Pugliese, conical-roofed *trullo* building. *Free.* ilfrantolio.com

Snacking on Liguria's street food

From pesto to focaccia, Genoese street food has certainly left its mark on the world. Local chef and food writer Enrica Monzani will show you how on her Genoa Food Tour, taking you through medieval alleyways and 19th-century streets in search of the city's best food. She'll introduce you to Italy's oldest confectioner, a retro spice shop and an art nouveau cafe, among many other delights. Afterwards, travel south to the Cinque Terre villages to enjoy more Liguruan delicacies on the coast. *£86 per person.* asmallkitcheningenoa.com

Truffle hunting in Umbria

The town of Norcia is one of Italy's gastro havens, and Palazzo Seneca — a hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant — plunges you straight into the scene. Its truffle hunting and ricotta cheese-making class is unmissable. A dog-guided truffle hunt in Monti Sibillini National Park ends with an outdoor ricotta-making lesson in a field. The end result is then part of a picnic that includes sausages (cooked al fresco), spelt salad and local wines. *From £761 for two, including two nights B&B.* palazzoseneca.com

Bonding over wine in Alta Badia

Don't call the locals Italian in Alta Badia, high up in South Tyrol's Dolomites. This is a centre of Ladin culture, and this ethnic group, which has lived in the mountains for millennia, still has its own language and customs. The area's biannual Nos Ladins ('we are Ladins') programme lets visitors learn about their culture. A typical experience could involve baking traditional biscuits or a tasting of local wines. The tourist board website has dates and prices. *From £22 per person.* altabadia.org

Clockwise from above: Street food on the CInque Terre in Liguria; egg pasta with truffle, whichis found in the woods of Umbria; bee hives on a terraced lemon grove on the Amalfi Coast; raising a toast in the Dolomites

Tasting Sardinia

Sardinia has a diet so healthy that many places are designated Blue Zones (areas with high levels of longevity). Sapori & Saperi's 10-day Celebrating Sardinia trip takes in the best of the island. You'll watch a shepherd make ricotta and *pecorino sardo* cheese, visit salt pans and wineries, head out for lunch on a tuna-fishing boat and have a bread-making lesson. *From £2,294 per person.* sapori-e-saperi.com

When life gives you Amalfi lemons...

For centuries, Amalfi's lemon groves were central to the economy of the Amalfi Coast, but the punishing manual work involved plus price drops and the arrival of mass tourism has meant that most trees have disappeared. Salvatore Aceto is on a mission to keep the tradition alive. He leads tours around his family farm, on the cliffside above the town of Amalfi, taking groups through the terraces and finishing with lemonade and lemon cake. *From £22 per person.* amalfilemonexperience.it

Pasta-making alla Bolognese

Bologna is known for its *sfogline*, (almost always) women who hand-roll egg pasta as light as a silk scarf and stuff it with delicious fillings, from simple ricotta and spinach to the mix of prosciutto, mortadella and Parmesan that goes into tortellini. Learn how to roll with the best in an afternoon lesson from the *sfogline* of La Salumeria, one of the city's best delicatessens. You'll make the pasta dough from scratch, then roll it out and create tagliatelle, tortellini and tortelloni. *£80 per person.* la-salumeria.it

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19 URBINO: THE IDEAL CITY

Beautifully preserved Urbino brims with Renaissance palazzos, galleries and churches

Inside the National Gallery of the Marche is a painting called La Città Ideale ('the ideal city'). The work of an anonymous 15th-century artist, it could be the blueprint for the archetypal Renaissance city. Appropriately, the gallery in which it sits is part of another *città ideale*: Urbino, one of very few well-preserved Renaissance cities remaining in Italy.

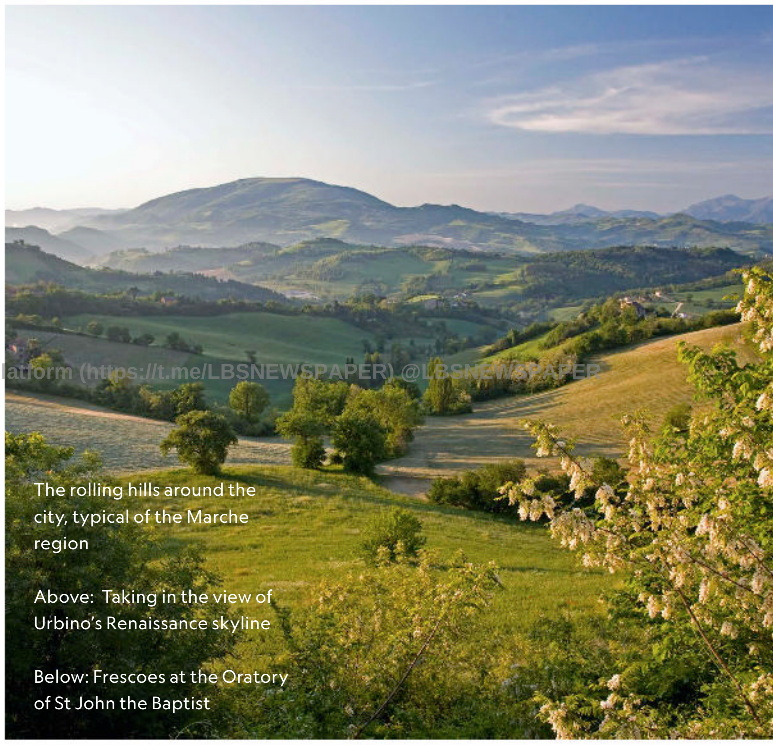
Governed in the 15th century by Federico da Montefeltro, a mercenary turned cultured ruler, Urbino was a powerhouse for art, literature and architecture. And where other Renaissance cities like Florence are today drowning in tourists, Urbino is blissfully unbothered. The modern part is hidden behind a hillside, the made-for-horses alleys of the centre are still car-free and, at first glance, the city has barely changed since the time of Federico.

Start with his Ducal Palace: part fortress, part fairytale castle. Today, it houses the National Gallery of the Marche, which displays works by the likes of Raphael and Piero della Francesca. Climb one of the twin conical towers — built to keep watch over the surrounding landscape, but also simply to look good. gallerianazionalemarche.it

Federico lured artists, writers and architects to his court, one of whom was Giovanni Santi, Raphael's father. A short walk from the Palazzo Ducale is Casa Raffaello, where one of the greatest artists of all time was born. In the courtyard here, you can see Santi's pigment-blending stone, while in one of the bedrooms is a fresco of a Madonna and Child, said to be the work of the teenage Raphael. casaraffaello.com

Then it's time for lunch. Buy a *crescia*, a lardy flatbread stuffed like a sandwich — and eat it in Parco della Resistenza, high on the hill, with knockout views of the Renaissance streets unfurling below. Returning to town, it's time to go further back in time. Laid out across two hills, Urbino is home to steep streets called *piole* — severely lacking in steps, to help those Renaissance horses. Next to the Scalinata San Giovanni — a *piole* with, for once, stairs — is the Oratory of St John the Baptist. One of the rare places remaining from before Federico's time, its gothic frescoes of curiously joyful Biblical scenes were painted in the early 1400s by Lorenzo and Jacopo Salimbeni, two brothers from the city.

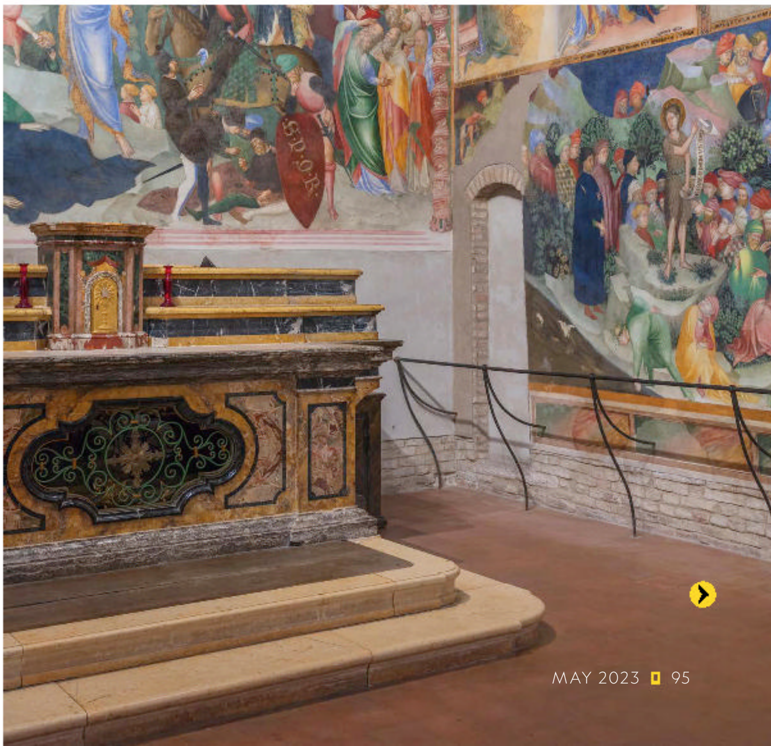
All that art will bring on an appetite, so finish, as the great Renaissance painters did, with dinner at Antica Osteria da la Stella, an inn since the 1400s. Try the *passatelli* — pasta made from breadcrumbs, eggs and Parmesan that's smeared in butter and topped with shaved black truffle. anticaosteriadalastella.com



The rolling hills around the city, typical of the Marche region

Above: Taking in the view of Urbino's Renaissance skyline

Below: Frescoes at the Oratory of St John the Baptist



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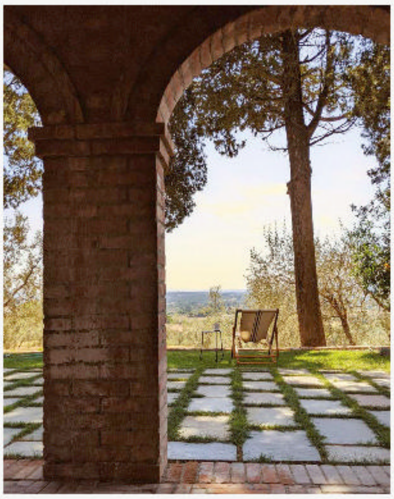

The terrace overlooking the valley

CIPRESSO E PIETRA

An adults-only, sustainable luxury escape in southern Tuscany.

Cipresso e Pietra is an adults-only, luxury escape just outside the walls of Lucignano, a vibrant medieval village in southern Tuscany. The 19th-century stone farmhouse has been transformed into a boutique B&B where original features meet luxury interiors. They specialise in long evenings, relaxing mornings, and tailored experiences to help you uncover the hidden gems of Tuscany.

Feel good about your stay as they focus on sustainability by reducing their environmental footprint and positively impacting local communities.

Our king deluxe room overlooks the olive groves.

The breakfast dining room

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20 THE OTHER **SARDINIA**

From prehistoric towers and stone circles to modern-day murals, here are some of the island's highlights beyond the beach

Su Nuraxi

Sardinia is littered with over 7,000 *nuraghes* — mysterious coned towers and structures built by the prehistoric Nuragic civilisation. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Su Naraxi is the finest and most complete example: a sprawling settlement outside the modern village of Barumini. It was founded in 1500 BC and in use for over 1,000 years. fondazionebarumini.it

Orgosolo

Barbagia, a mountainous region in eastern Sardinia, is a repository of the island's ancient traditions. Within it, Orgosolo displays evidence of a much more modern history: since 1975, the town has been daubed with murals, many of them political, often depicting anti-fascist marches and anti-government protests. It's like strolling through an open-air gallery.

Arzachena

In the mountains above the Costa Smeralda is a wealth of archaeological remains. No fewer than eight ancient sites are scattered around Arzachena, telling 6,000 years of history. Don't miss the 'giants' tombs' of Coddu Vecchiu and Li Longhi — burial places marked by huge menhirs — or the Necropolis of Li Muri, which includes several stone circles. arzachenaturismo.com

Museo del Carbone

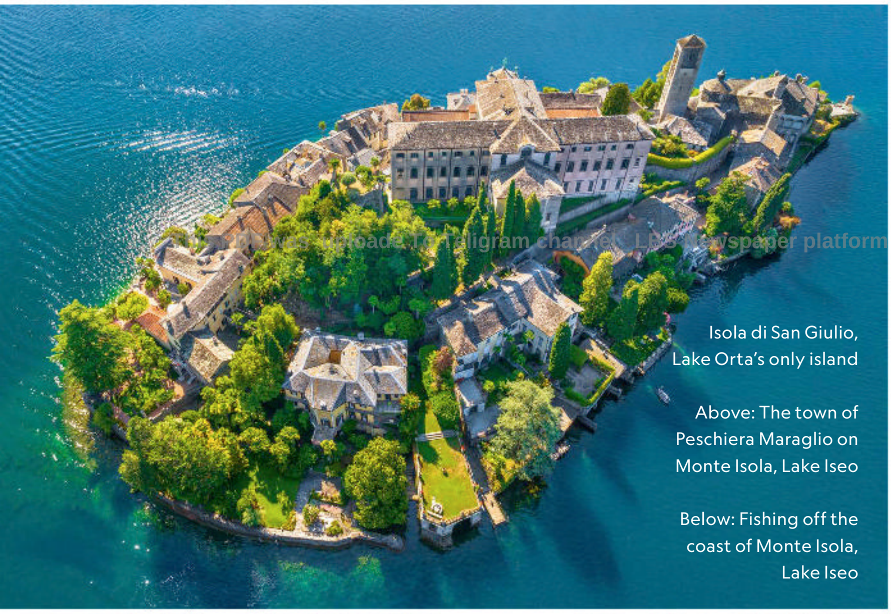
Dating back to 1938, the town of Carbonia, on Sardinia's west coast is a time capsule of rationalist architecture, built from scratch by the Fascists around their new Serbariu coal mine. Today, the decommissioned mine is home to the Museo del Carbone ('coal museum'). A visit can include a family-friendly guided walk through one of the shafts. museodelcarbone.it

Asinara

Yes it's a beach, but it's not exactly a space to flop. Asinara, an island off the northwest coast, belongs to its four-legged inhabitants — the white (albino) donkeys and horses that have prowled this rocky landscape for centuries. The island is today a national park and marine reserve, with hiking trails, a turtle sanctuary and, of course, beaches. parcoasinara.org

Wild horses on the island of Asinara

IMAGE: GETTY



Isola di San Giulio, Lake Orta's only island

Above: The town of Peschiera Maraglio on Monte Isola, Lake Iseo

Below: Fishing off the coast of Monte Isola, Lake Iseo

21 LAKE LIFE

Who needs Como or Garda when you have Iseo and Orta? Here's how to visit these lesser-known lakes

ISEO

Between Lakes Como and Garda — the town of Bergamo on one side, Brescia the other — Lake Iseo has handsome towns, a beautiful island and brilliant train and ferry connections, making it an easy, low-carbon option.

See: Hop on a ferry to Monte Isola ('island mountain'), the huge, humped island in the middle of the lake. Get off at the village of Sensole and follow the path past olive groves to Peschiera Maraglio, the island's tiny town, with sensational lake views provided en route. From there, continue northwards by ferry to Lovere, the most precious jewel in Iseo's glittering crown. Tucked away in Iseo's northeastern corner, the town used to be ruled by Venice — hence the lion on the clock tower, and the colonnaded waterfront. Don't miss the Accademia Tadini, a gallery with works by Giovanni Bellini, Francesco Hayez and Antonio Canova. accademiatadini.it

Stay: Agriturismo Forest. This simple B&B has great views of Iseo's wetlands — and even better food. Its unassuming, farm-to-table restaurant serves modern takes on Italian classics. agriturismoforest.it

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ORTA

Dwarfed by neighbouring Lake Maggiore, Orta is the lake of choice for discerning Milanese — it's easy to get to but sees a fraction of the visitors to Como and Maggiore.

See: Listen carefully, and you'll hear singing drifting across the water from Isola di San Giulio. The lake's only island, it's home to a Benedictine monastery whose nuns hold mass in a frescoed Romanesque basilica. Orta San Giulio is the lake's pretty main town, with pastel-coloured palazzi lined up along the waterfront. Sit at a bar in Piazza Mario Motta for an aperitivo overlooking the water.

Stay: Laqua by the Lake. This lavish Relais & Chateaux property — a 19th-century Moorish-style pile — sits right on the lake. It's run by Italian celebrity chef Antonio Cannavacciuolo, who operates a three-Michelin-star restaurant here.

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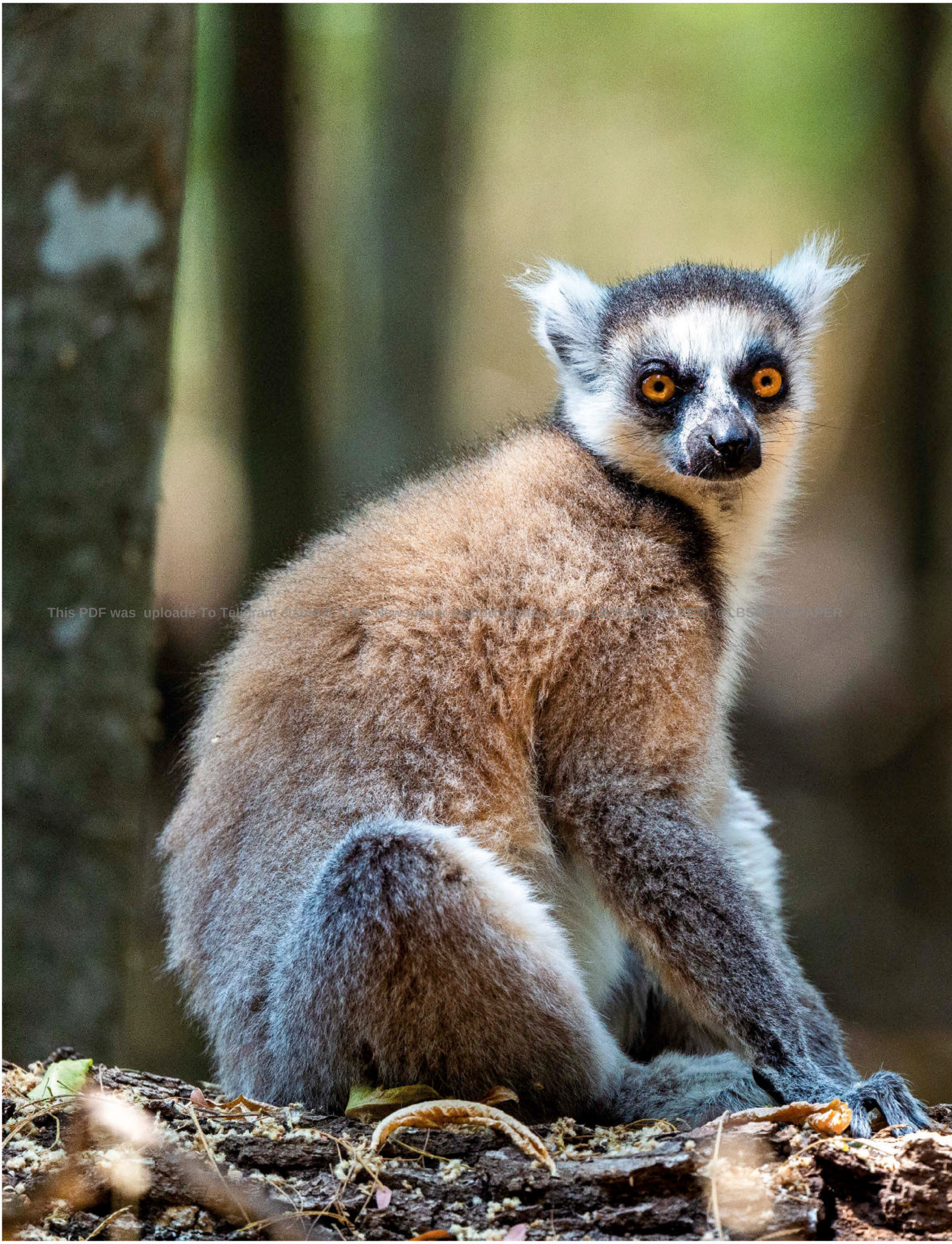


Spirits *of the* sacred forest

MADAGASCAR IS HOME TO COLOURFUL CHAMELEONS, FIERCE FOSSAS AND OVER 100 SPECIES OF LEMUR. BUT WITH MUCH OF THE INDIAN OCEAN ISLAND'S WILDLIFE FACING EXTINCTION, ITS INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND ECO LODGES ARE FOCUSED ON CONSERVING THEIR PRECIOUS HABITATS

WORDS: SARAH MARSALL
PHOTOGRAPHS: RENATO GRANIERI

Pointing is considered rude by many cultures.

But in the riverine gallery forests of southeast Madagascar — and everywhere else on the island — extending an index finger is a serious taboo, one of many covered by *fady*, a range of cultural prohibitions supposedly enforced by supernatural powers. “You can use your knuckle or a full hand,” suggests guide Theophile Zafison when I ask how else we’re supposed to zone in on lemurs camouflaged in thick undergrowth or hiding in a tangle of treetops. Without the aid of digits, searches require more time spent trying to decipher exactly which branch everyone is talking about.

Stepping over the shrivelled, sticky pods shed by tamarind trees, we carefully scan the canopy for signs of movement. As strong and sturdy as marble columns in a cathedral, thick trunks support a vaulted cupola of fading greenery. Like rays refracted through a stained-glass window, broken beams of sunlight scatter patterns across earthy aisles. In this temple built by nature, there’s a solemnity only the spirits of ancestors can command.

Once used as a burial site, this forest has inadvertently had its future safeguarded by respect for departed elders. Considered untouchable in local lore, this resting place for the dead has become a home for the living also: paradise flycatchers flit through shadows, warty chameleons spiral their tails around branches and ring-tailed lemurs caterwaul to departed souls.

In theory, Madagascar has a lot to lament. At the frontline of climate change, this island nation in the Indian Ocean has been battered by cyclones and suffered years of sustained drought, while certain areas teeter on the brink of famine. Life expectancy is one of the lowest in Africa (63 for men and 68 for women) and according to data from the World Bank around 80% of people live below the poverty line. Most roads are so potholed and broken you could be forgiven for thinking a meteor shower had recently rained down.

Yet for all its difficulties, challenges and problems, there’s nowhere else on the planet like Madagascar. Once part of supercontinent Gondwana, it began to split from Africa 180 million years ago, and from the Indian subcontinent 90 million years later. Eons of isolation has led to high levels of endemism; about 70% of an estimated 250,000 species exist only here. Among the evolutionary wonders are chameleons whose skin colour changes to regulate their body temperature; carnivorous fossas, small mammals as fierce as any dog but as stealthy as a cat; and, of course, lemurs — the charismatic primates that inspired several blockbuster animated films.

Of the 107 known lemur species surviving on this massive island (Madagascar is about the size of France), several can be found in the forests around Ifotaka, a town and commune in the far south of the country, where the land is dry, winds are warm and life unfolds around a river that hasn’t flowed for almost six months. This remote, arid Eden belongs to the Antandroy people, one of 18 ethnic groups in the country, and the only way to reach it is via a bumpy, four-hour drive from coastal city Fort-Dauphin, where flights connect to the

Right: A safari vehicle drives through an avenue of baobabs in one of Ifotaka’s sisal plantations

Previous pages: Ring-tailed lemur in a forest in Ifotaka

main airport in the capital, Antananarivo.

Once nomadic, large numbers of Antandroy communities have settled to work on sisal plantations first cultivated in the 1930s to produce rope. In a space once occupied by native forest, the agave plant is now cultivated in uniform rows. Introduced from Mexico, the plant has fronds so sharp they slice like knives. Wooden carts drawn by humpbacked zebu cattle trundle along a dusty thoroughfare, passing men on rusty bikes with sacks of charcoal stacked precariously on rear racks. At the back of the plantation is the Mandrare River Camp, its seven en suite safari-style tents perched along a river that typically runs between November and June, creating fertile, seasonal farmland. It dried out early this year, explains Theo, a guide at the camp. Regardless, people have gone ahead and planted sweet potatoes in the silty sand, singing day and night as they cross the riverbed between their homes and the sisal-processing factory. It's part of Antandroy culture to sing whether you're happy or sad.

Owned by Englishman Edward Tucker Brown, Mandrare is the only tourist lodge in the Ifotaka area, supporting both the community and their last remaining patches of forest by providing employment, building schools and improving roads. These precious pockets of greenery not only act as sacred burial grounds, but also form one of the oldest of Madagascar's four distinctive ecoregions, supporting an array of fantastical vegetation. Once inhabited by enormous elephant birds and gorilla-sized lemurs, it's still a hotbed of endemic creatures, including a species of octopus tree with sprawling, spiny arms and a chameleon that spends most of its life as an egg.

A good example of this unique, spiny forest habitat can be found a 45-minute drive from the lodge, where we join local spotter Managnandro for a late-afternoon walk. In a clearing, smoke bellows from a fire a boy is using to burn needles from cactus paddles, rendering them safe to use as fodder for his zebus. Further along, a small cupboard has been carved into the bulbous trunk of a baobab; once used as a water store, it's now empty. A big tree like this would be considered sacred and it would have been spared the chop

From left: A mother Verreaux's sifaka and her infant climb an octopus tree in spiny forest in Ifotaka; Antandroy women at a weekly market in Ifotaka; guide Theophile Zafison with local spotter Managnandro explore a spiny forest in Ifotaka because an ancestor could be living in it.

"Now, it's the local people who manage their resources," says Theo as we enter the forest. "We just provide support by helping them understand there are more ways to use and protect forests as a source of income, rather than chopping them down. As long as you include the communities, they feel very proud."

As 'spiny forest' suggests, everything here is spiky, thorny or sharp to touch. Defying all logic, the Verreaux's sifaka lemur has mastered the ability to scale this hostile vegetation without feeling even a pin prick. "Dancing, dancing!" whispers Theo excitedly, as the nimble-footed creatures spring energetically across a dance floor of fine, ruby-red sand, using their long tails and powerful hind legs to scale trees. Above us, a yellow-billed kite swoops past with a beetle cocoon in its mouth — a reminder that nothing goes to waste in this harsh environment.

Once darkness has fallen, a new, nocturnal world emerges. Living up to their name, white-footed sportive lemurs perform acrobatics in the treetops, their huge eyes glowing like beacons in our red torchlight. Much harder to spot are mouse lemurs, whose diet of insects has been drastically curtailed by the lack of rain. "I've only seen a handful this year," says Theo, as the Milky Way smudges a silver arc above us, decorating the canopy with garlands of fairy lights made up of stars.

The market that arrives in the Ifotaka every week is a focal point. Especially fond of straw hats, women use the occasion to display their best headgear: a boater, a fedora with a floral band, or a wide-brimmed bonnet. Beyond looking good, it's sensible attire when the sun blazes this hard.

Some villagers come here to buy livestock, fix bikes at a makeshift workshop or buy T-shirts with slogans laden with unintentional irony: 'Drink water so you are not thirsty'; 'I sacrifice my life to live in paradise'. Others arrive with empty USB sticks to download the latest music from clunky laptops whirring and wheezing their last electronic breaths. But for most, it's an opportunity to socialise. "This is where we exchange the latest news and gossip," laughs Theo. "It's our form of social media." Single men advertise their status by wedging a comb into their coarse curls, while shy, young women reciprocate by wearing a pair of white hair clips.

By lunchtime, the market is over and trucks laden with unsold goods begin their long

journeys home. Heading back to Mandrare, we stop at Ifotaka, the closest village to the lodge, where houses have been constructed from the distinctive, pock-marked wood of the octopus tree. In a small square, women selling tomatoes, peanuts and tobacco beautify their faces with a sun-protecting paste made from ground bark and tattoos etched using prickly pear spines. Below their feet scuttle chicks spray-painted fuchsia pink, a ploy — I later learn — to fool marauding birds of prey.

Wrapped in a sarong bordered with Malagasy proverbs, matriarch Nety Sailambo invites us into a gift shop the lodge helped her to build. “Before, there was a lot of rain, a lot of forest. But now the drought is always there,” she complains, while rearranging raffia chameleons on a shelf. “I’m struggling to find food because nothing grows.”

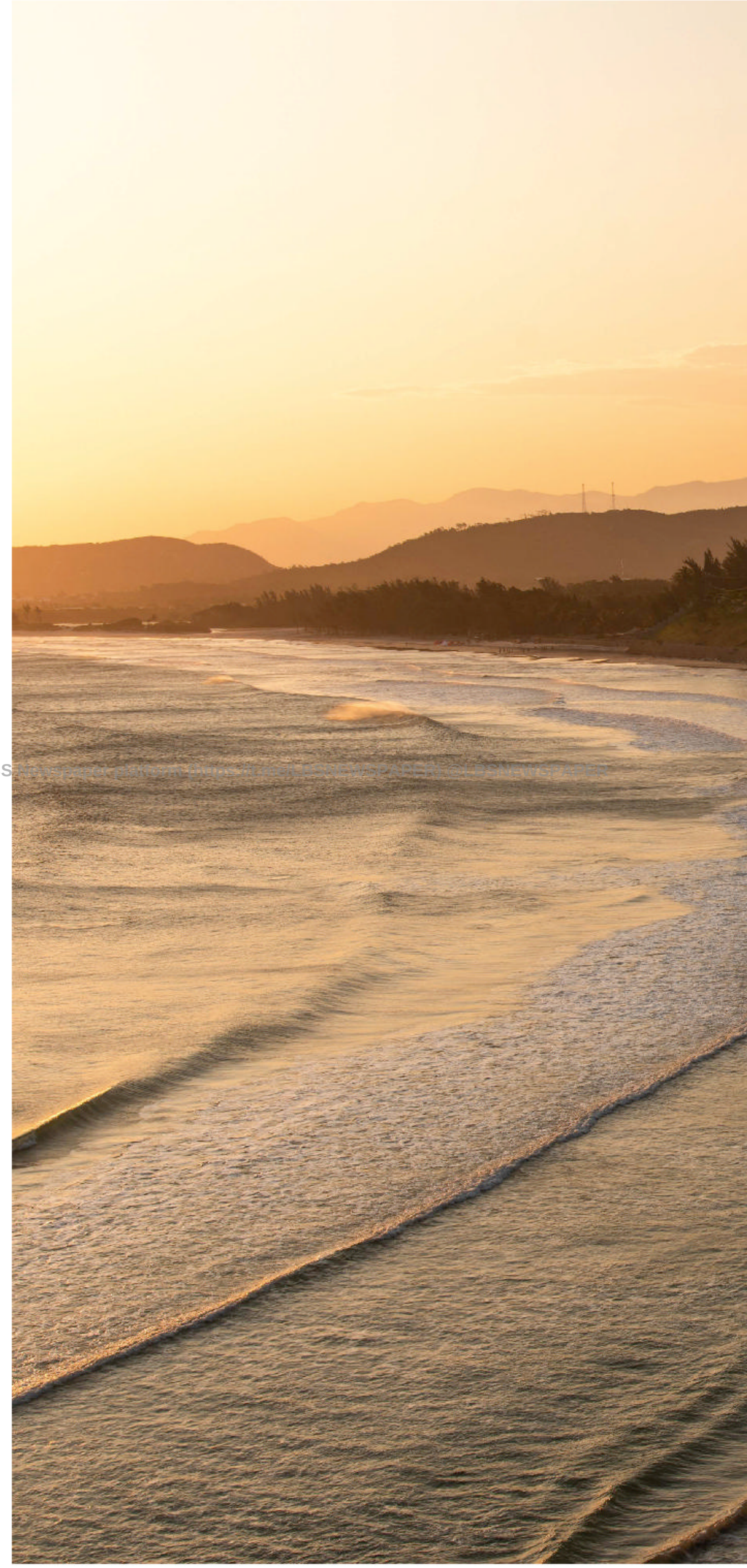
Nety admits some areas have been slashed and burned out of desperation to create new agricultural plots for a rapidly growing population, but for the most part local people protect the forest “because that’s why the *vazahas* [foreigners] come”.

Despite all the hardships Nety faces in Ifotaka, she’s determined to stay put. “All my children were born here, they grew up here,” she says, almost drowned out by the giggles of her grandkids playing with a skipping rope made of rags. “I’ll never leave this place.”

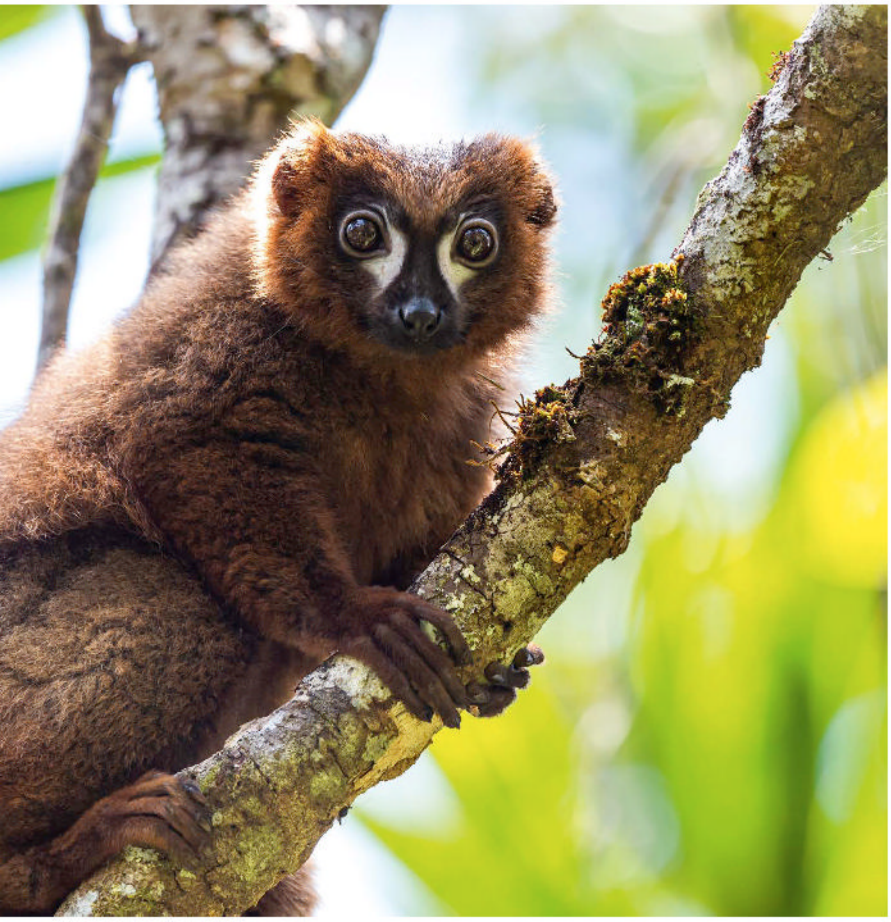
Rare finds in the rainforest

The WWF estimates Madagascar has lost more than 80% of its natural areas, a figure likely to have risen since the pandemic. During that period, a drop in tourism coupled with poverty led to a rise in deforestation as demand for charcoal, firewood and building materials grew. In the central part of the country, a four-hour drive east of the capital along roads destroyed by convoys of heavy goods trucks, the protected primary rainforest of Andasibe-Mantadia National Park is one of the areas hardest hit.

For now, most tour guides have stopped taking tourists to the Mantadia area of the



A beach in Fort Dauphin, a gateway to the Ifotaka region



Clockwise from above: Red-bellied lemur in the community-run Maromiziha Reserve; community guide Etienne Miandriarison searches for wildlife in the Maromiziha Reserve; boats docked at a village settlement on Nosy Ankao; Parson's chameleon, endemic to primary forests in north and eastern Madagascar; one of the luxury villas at Miavana by Time + Tide, located on private island Nosy Ankao

park, instead focusing on Andasibe. Paved trails wind through areas rich in wildlife, making the place extremely accessible (during my visit I'm never far from crowds). I prefer the neighbouring Maromiziha Reserve, a project managed by nonprofit primate conservation organisation GERP and the local community, which opened to the public in 2018. Paths are steeper and animal sightings require patience, but it's open 24 hours (whereas Andasibe-Mantadia National Park entry is restricted to 8am to 4pm) and the rewards of being nearly alone are worth it.

Etienne Miandriarison is one of 30 local guides taking visitors around the reserve. In the past, he used the forest's trees as a resource for making charcoal, he tells me. But Etienne now sees the screwpine, ironwood and dragon trees as climate regulators, tourist attractions and, above all, a source of fascination. "Finally, we all understand how important this place is," he says, "and we enjoy sharing it with everyone who comes."

Keen to introduce us to his favourite residents, Etienne sets his sights on finding the indri. Shrieking wails soon echo through the valley, leading us to the largest living lemur. Keeping watch for his troop, a sentinel stares down at us, his bulging eyes glued to our every move. On a roll, Etienne is then eager to show us one of Maromiziha's rarer species, the critically endangered red-bellied lemur — even harder to find due to its lack of defined territory. Working our way over streams and flowers as frilly as a pair of French knickers, we climb to viewpoints and stumble down hillsides. But even a team of Italian PhD students camping at a research station where we stop for a break haven't had any success in sighting one.

Our luck changes when Etienne takes a detour to show us a waterfall. Lighting up like a bulb, his expression tells us all we need to know. Feeding on fruit, two red-bellies are too distracted to notice us creep up on them, and we're able to track their movements through the trees for some time. The male, distinguishable by white patches around his eyes resembling spectacles, struggles to keep up with his mate. The female leaps to a branch and is less than a metre away from me. Cocking her head curiously to one side, she registers my shock, and after rubbing her bottom up and down a trunk, she's gone in a scarlet flash.

Sadly, almost all lemur species are threatened with extinction. At Miavana by Time + Tide, a luxury resort on Nosy Ankao island, off the northeast coast of Madagascar,

efforts are underway to reverse that trend. Because it's so remote, it would take seven hours to get there from the nearest airport by road and boat — so all guests arrive by helicopter. Our transfer from Arrachart Airport becomes an aerial safari, flying over avenues of swollen baobabs and a forest of limestone dagger peaks known as 'tsingy', eventually reaching emerald bays speckled with kitesurfers and surfacing whales.

The property features 14 butler-serviced villas curving around the coastline in a marine protected area. Glass buoys dangle from the ceiling and palms sway above a pool, but the real luxury is the opportunity to witness community and wildlife conservation first-hand.

Learning from lemurs

Between 2014 and 2017, 100,000 indigenous trees were planted on Nosy Ankao, and since then eight crowned lemurs have been translocated to the island after their home on the mainland became threatened. Using a telemetry device, we track down a collared alpha female, crawling through tunnels of snagging twigs and sticky spider webs to get a good view. Eventually, the animals — thriving in their new home — will be returned, but until that time comes they'll continue to provide an educational resource for schoolchildren and jobs for local people, including ranger Saniva Clarita, who admits, "For now, I'd like them to stay here."

Miavana has a 99-year lease on Nosy Ankao, which has been permanently inhabited since the early 2000s. Before that, it was used by treasure-stashing pirates, later becoming the site of a seaweed farm and a base for fishermen. The community living here today still debate over the ownership of coconut trees and whether or not the sacrifice of a zebu as part of a burial ceremony should take place on a sacred spot outside villa 12.

A trip to Ampasimangidy, the island's main village, offers a slice of welcome reality. Accompanied by the resort's conservation field officer Zach Jordaan, who speaks fluent

Sarah Marshall joins Miavana's conservation officer, Zach Jordaan, for an excursion around Nosy Ankao in a traditional wooden sailing boat

Malagasy, I stop in at Mama Ceylon's wooden bar and grocery store for a snack of fried king mackerel and green mango salad. Disco lights flash and music crackles from wardrobe-sized speakers as the build-up to the regular Friday-night revelries begins.

Further down the road, village president Jean Claude Jaodimasy invites us into his immaculate home, constructed from ironwood. Bright plastic bouquets sit in vases on paper doilies next to jars of Ovaltine in a home that wouldn't look out of place in Billericay. Having been instrumental in setting up the marine protected area, Jean Claude is confident fishing will now be done sustainably; he's also been working hard to secure community endorsement for the lemur conservation programme. "Without forest there would be no life," he insists.

In the past, people would've chopped down mangroves for wood and charcoal, but now these important carbon sequesters are protected. Climbing into a sailing boat made from a hollowed Canarium trunk and stitched rice sacks, we drift into a maze of semi-submerged plants, watching crabs scamper through a confusion of salty stalks.

Conversation soon turns to *fady*. It's prohibited to bring domestic animals onto the island, says Zac, sharing the story of a farmer who stowed a pig on a sailing boat and lost his yield of seaweed for the season (an act, supposedly, of divine retribution). Or the lighthouse keeper who smuggled a dog into his home; less than 24 hours later, it mysteriously died. Of course, these prohibitions have a practical purpose: human bodies are buried on the island and animals have a habit of digging them up.

But taboos have also become an important tool for conservation. It's *fady*, for example, to kill lemurs or chop down trees — beliefs more powerful than any government directive. And while so much has already been lost in Madagascar, what remains has never been more precious. Yes, there are difficulties, challenges and problems, but in a broken paradise, where every species struggles for survival, it's hard to apportion blame.

Rather than dwelling on what's gone, communities from south to north are focused on preserving what they have for the future. After all, there's nothing to be gained from finger-pointing. It would, in fact, be *fady*. ◻

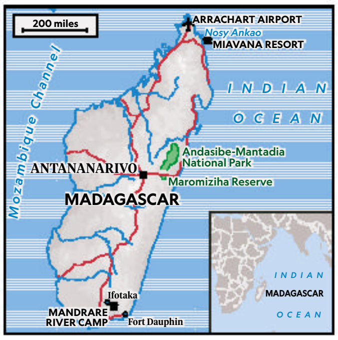


ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Madagascar's capital Antananarivo is the entry point for most flights; there's also an international airport in the north east on the island of Nosy Be. There are no direct flights to Madagascar from the UK. Kenya Airways flies via its hub in Nairobi, Ethiopian Airlines flies from London via Addis Ababa, and Airlink will resume flights from Johannesburg to Nosy Be from June 2023.
kenya-airways.com
ethiopianairlines.com flyairlink.com
Average flight time: 15h.
Domestic flights between islands are operated by Air Madagascar. Currently, routes (typically flying from Antananarivo) are limited.
madagascarairlines.com
Despite often being potholed, roads are the only way to reach most places.

WHEN TO GO

The cool, dry austral winter (April to October) is the best time to visit, with temperatures from 10-26C. September to December is when lemurs are most active, as temperatures rise to around 27C. Heavy rain from December to March means many camps close. The south west receives much less rain.

WHERE TO STAY

Mandrare River Camp, Ifotaka.
From £1,684 per person, full board, for a three-night minimum stay.
madaclassic.com
Miavana by Time + Tide, Nosy Ankao.
Villas from £2,836 per person, per night full board. miavana.com

MORE INFO

madagascar-tourisme.com

HOW TO DO IT

Rainbow offers a 15-night trip to Mandrare River Camp, Mantadia Lodge and Miavana by Time + Tide from £19,145 per person, including full- and half-board accommodation, transfers, tours and flights from London to Antananarivo with Kenya Airways.
rainbowtours.co.uk

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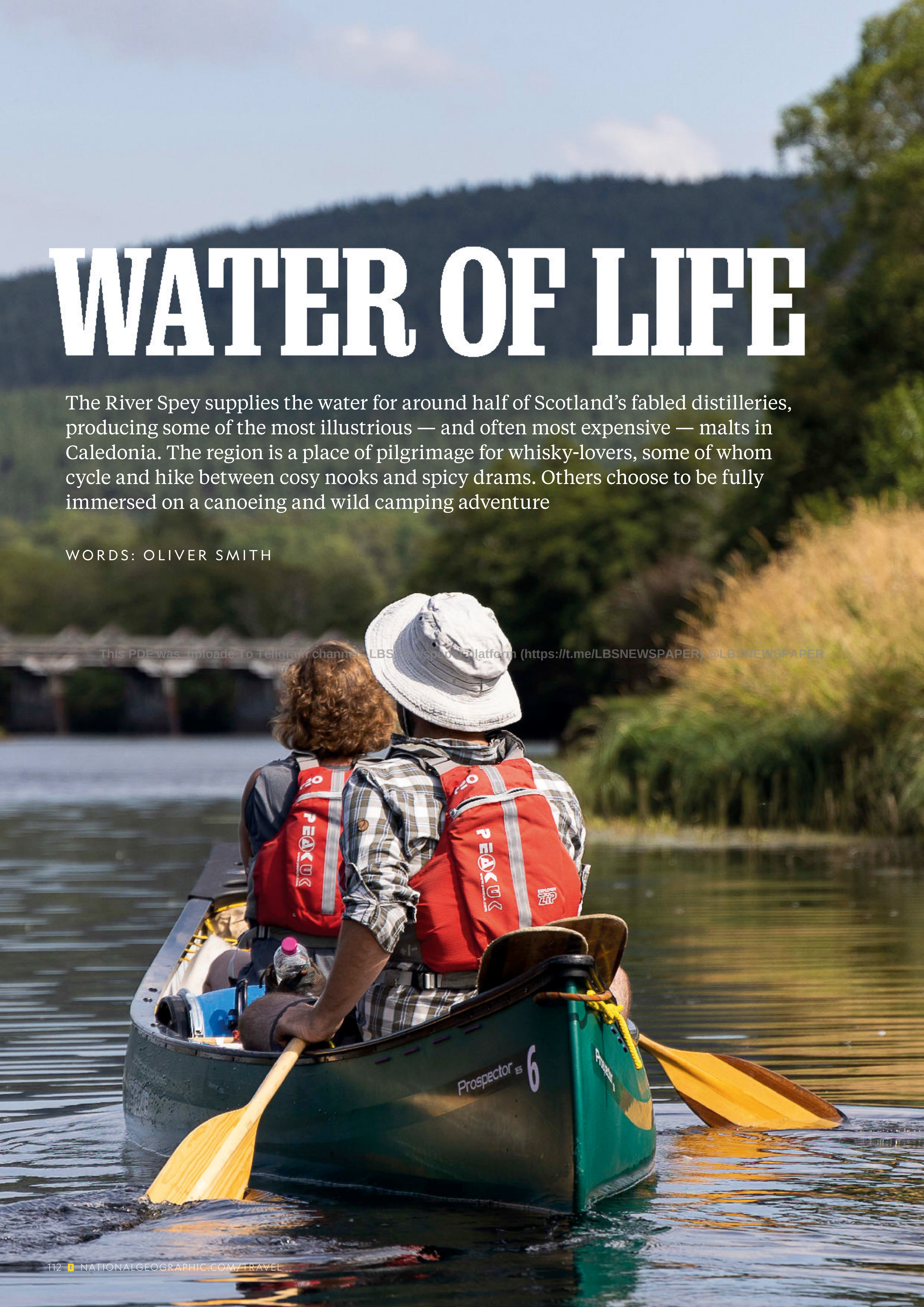
WATER OF LIFE

The River Spey supplies the water for around half of Scotland's fabled distilleries, producing some of the most illustrious — and often most expensive — malts in Caledonia. The region is a place of pilgrimage for whisky-lovers, some of whom cycle and hike between cosy nooks and spicy drams. Others choose to be fully immersed on a canoeing and wild camping adventure

WORDS: OLIVER SMITH



IMAGES: CONOR MCCARTHY

In airport departure lounges around the world, you can always find a selection of Scottish whiskies for sale. Upon the shelves will be bottles whose names recited together sound like poetry — Linkwood and Longmorn, Knockdhu and Knockando.

Passengers seem to buy Scottish whisky as a final act before jetting off on a long journey: a token to be taken up into the air. Whiskies are delicious, prestigious. But their appeal worldwide is in their promise of a certain landscape, with labels that summon faraway glens, frosted Munros and rushing streams, some of whose currents have been captured. Many bottles are inscribed with the solemn fact: the word 'whisky' comes from the Scottish Gaelic *uisge beatha*, or 'water of life.'

This water is — as often as it is not — from the basin of the River Spey, among the finest and fastest of Scottish rivers. The Spey and its many tributaries supply water for about half of Scottish distilleries: the region produces the sweetest, most expensive and, some say, the most illustrious malts in Caledonia. It's the closest thing whisky has to a headquarters, a heartland — even a holy land. The region is a place of pilgrimage for whisky-lovers, some of whom hike or cycle between distilleries in trips of escalating wobbliness.

I'm here, however, to make a canoe expedition along the River Spey, starting from where it gathers momentum amid the Cairngorms and ending four days later where it braids out into the saltwater of the North Sea. Plenty of people arrive in the Cairngorms hoping to conquer their rocky summits and make ascents of the immense mountains. The descent of the Spey, by contrast, entails making not a conquest but an alliance with the current. You come to learn the singular behaviours of the river water, as surely as whisky aficionados understand the nuances of single malts.

"You can't fight Grandfather Spey," explains Jerry Craig, the leader of my expedition. "Instead, you work with him. And you must always treat him with respect."

Jerry has been guiding descents on the river for some three decades and serves as an official river adviser representing the canoeing community. It's a serious job for a serious river — the descent of the Spey isn't a leisurely day trip. Stashed into the four boats in our armada is everything needed for three nights of wild camping on the riverbank. There are tents, tipis, sleeping bags, chairs, stoves and food — dry bags packed within dry bags like Russian dolls. And somewhere amid the tangled ropes and paddles are two bottles of whisky, whose golden contents might, in another life, have mingled with the river water.

"Every time you set out on the Spey, it's a different river," says Jerry. "It's as if you're getting to know it for the very first time."

His words ring true as we push off in the village of Boat of Garten. This is one of many places named 'Boat' along the river, a reference to the ferrymen who plied their trade here before the building of bridges. Today, you wouldn't need a ferry to cross: the European heatwaves of 2022 mean river levels are the lowest Jerry can remember. At some points you could skip across the river without wetting your ankles. The channels for paddling have dwindled to a trickle: stones that had lain, undisturbed, on the riverbed since the last ice age are now being scraped by the hulls of our canoes. It is, as Jerry describes, what's known as a 'bony' river. A few times we have to hop out and lug our canoes over the skeletal trickle of the Spey.

Eventually, the river fleshes out, fattened by the streams that feed it, and the going gets easier. The sun shines. The Spey is, I soon appreciate, a river of exquisite beauty. Dragonflies whirr through the balmy midsummer air as lavender-hued mountains

Clockwise from top: A section of the Spey; preparing wood-fired pizza on shore; writer Oliver Smith checks his progress

Previous pages, from left: Navigating the Spey; whisky being poured into a quaich, a traditional Scottish two-handled cup

IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK; CONOR MCCARTHY

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IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK; CONOR MCCARTHY

Clockwise from top: The Spey and Craigellachie; preparing dessert over an open flame; Jerry Craig reads the river

line the horizon. Herons perch on logs, watching us paddle past with suspicious yellow eyes, and sandpipers flit from their riverbank nests. Most British rivers dawdle and detour their way from source to sea; the Spey, however beelines to the coast in a steep, straight descent. Midriver, the current is full of push and purpose. But at the edges, the water eddies and tarries: water boatmen thrust through limpid pools enclosed by drapes of willows. Goose feathers glide adrift, backs delicately arched like tiny boats.

Very soon, you surrender to the rhythm of the river journey, falling into the contented cadences of paddling. Time passes, watching tiny whirlpools spin with every stroke, observing droplets beading from each withdrawn blade. Only occasionally do we instinctively rest our paddles, pausing the splash of strokes to listen with reverence to the song of the river and the chorus of its tributaries and let ourselves drift.

Then we blow off course and have to start paddling again. Our vessels are Canadian canoes designed for a crew of two: I'm sharing mine with Josephine, a teaching assistant from Leeds. She explains she decided to book a canoe expedition after a period of upheaval in her personal life, including a divorce from her husband of 27 years. She recently bought her own flat by a canal — and two days later, she purchased a kayak. Waking up every day to quacking ducks, she says, takes her back to childhood weekends aboard her dad's boat.

"I step off the riverbank, where the rest of life happens, and then I'm away from it all," she tells me. "I've felt bouts of anxiety and depression: they're like a leech that sucks life out of you. But on the water, I have a total release."

That night, we make camp where the river makes a slight turn, as if to take one last look at the mountains that birthed its headwaters.

The Cairngorms are often described as the last great wilderness in mainland Britain — a wind-scoured mountain massif devoid of roads, settlements and, in large parts, people. From our camp, the peaks' outlines come into focus with the setting sun. There's the great pass of the Lairig Ghru (the drovers route that follows a cleft in the hills) and the lumpen mass of Cairn Gorm, its ski slopes closed for the summer. Many rivers rise in the Cairngorms, including the Dee, the Don, the Esk and the Tay, carving up the mountains like watery empires, but the Spey has the lion's share.

At this time of year, Jerry says, there might typically be some residual whiteness on the mountaintops — but now, in the heat, any snow has almost entirely melted away. Only a few chunks of ice will survive the August Bank Holiday, clinging to the north faces and trying to hold out for another winter, rather than melting, slackening and trickling into the Spey.

Worse places to wash up

Over the following days, the weather turns. Mist ghosts in from the mountains. A chill wind rivets the river with tiny waves. It's a classic Scottish summer. Jerry has a rich repertoire of words to describe the moods of rain, from 'mizzle' (a benign mixture of mist and drizzle) to acute scenarios when it's 'hosing' it down or 'hoofing' it down. Across Scotland, there's a rich vocabulary for rain, from a 'yillen' (a sudden, ambushing shower) to a 'smirr' (a fine, delicate rain).

The king of them all is 'dreich' (a word that tastes rotten in the mouth), meaning dull or gloomy and bringing to mind interminable downpours, waterlogged socks, rain splattering against window panes and days best spent doing jigsaws indoors. 'Dreich,' in my experience, is a word many Scots deliver with zest to disappointed holidaymakers, as if you'd be foolish to expect anything less.

It's dreich as the river sweeps us northward and the shadowy expanse of the Abernethy Forest swings by the stern of our canoes. The woods here are one of the last remaining strands of the Caledonian Forest, the ancient forest of Scots pine, juniper and birch that crept northward, following retreating glaciers, after the last ice age. It's a primaeval landscape. Eagles keep their eyries in the canopy. Wild cats prowl among the pine cones.

Many of the first journeys along the Spey were made on logging rafts. From the 15th century onwards, generations of loggers came to fell pine and birch, lashing them together into makeshift watercrafts. Having dammed the streams, they would release sudden cataracts to wash their timber downhill onto the Spey, bound for export by sea downstream. The loggers' so-called 'floating families' would then cling on for life to their rafts while one steered. Guides went ahead in small, round coracles to scout out the passage.

These loggers' rafts are long gone, but anyone paddling the Spey today is — in a legal sense — following in their slipstream. In the 1960s, an outdoorsman by the improbable name of Clive Freshwater was involved in a case in the House of Lords that eventually gave canoers the right of public navigation on the river, successfully citing the loggers of centuries past as having established the precedent.

While many British rivers are privately owned and closed to canoers, the Spey offers a precious taste of freedom — but with it comes responsibilities. Approaching Cragganmore, the river becomes fiercer: boulders hiccup the flow ahead of us, branches jam the channels and rags of whitewater crest our bow. The Spey has a strong undercurrent of folklore — cautionary tales about the might of the water. One legend tells of a white horse, An t-Each Ban, appearing to lost travellers on stormy nights, promising to carry them to safety before plunging them into a watery grave. The Spey 'seldom chuckles or wimples, but it often grumbles and roars ... There was a saying that her waters demanded at least one life a year,' wrote the folklorist Affleck Gray.

Jerry teaches us the subtle art of reading the river: V shapes denote an invisible boulder breaking the current; upside-down Vs suggest a channel of deeper water, or a seam through which a canoe might slip. Then he explains we're entering "a bit of a pinball section".

"You're steering what is essentially a 16ft bathtub," says Jerry. "So if you fill with water, you might tip over."

We put on helmets to navigate the Washing Machine, the most famous rapids on the Spey, where the river shatters into a bottleneck of furious, frothing water. We negotiate the slaloms at Knockando, where the water entangles itself amid islets and cliffs. The river seems unruly, but you soon understand it follows logic, obeying the rules of gravity and the constraints of geology. The challenge of a paddler is to insert yourself into this equation, refining the calculus of when to go along with

Clockwise from top left: Wild camping offers a new perspective on the Spey; flambéed crepes with Speyside gin and pine needles; ancient Abernethy, one of the last remaining strands of old-growth Caledonian Forest

IMAGES: CONOR MCCARTHY; RICHARD STONIER

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SPEYSIDE SINGLE MALT SCOTCH WHISKY
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12

From left: Canoes stacked on the riverbank after a day of paddling; a bottle of Aberlour 12

IMAGES: CONOR MCCARTHY

the current and when to jam your oar into the Spey in protest.

On the approach to Aberlour, our attention lapses and a hidden current sends Josephine and I spinning 90 degrees. We're trying to correct course when a rock slams the canoe mid-hull. We teeter on top of it briefly — a marble on a pane of glass. And then we're submerged, the hum of riverwater in our ears, resurfacing to see the canoe continuing along the Spey, uncrewed, unburdened of luggage and upside-down. Everyone is fine; everything is eventually recovered. If the Spey was in spate, full and fast-flowing, it could have been uglier. Mercifully, there are worse places to wash up than the village of Aberlour.

The secret ingredient

Like wine, some believe whisky has a 'terroir'. Highland whiskies often have a smokiness that mutters of peaty moorlands. Island whiskies have a saltiness that remembers Atlantic squalls. Speyside, meanwhile, is a fertile, pastoral valley. The sweetness of its whiskies whispers of summer orchards, with the gentle, rounded flavours evoking the gently contoured hills.

"Over time, you learn to refine your palate as a whisky drinker," says barman Ryan Gow. "You pick up things you didn't pick up before."

Ryan runs whisky-tasting classes at The Mash Tun, a bar in Aberlour, where we've temporarily parked our boats. Whisky percolates into every aspect of life here: lorries full of whisky rumble along the A-roads and the puffing chimneys of distilleries rise above slate rooftops. Inside The Mash Tun, we try a flight of single malts from distilleries we'd paddled past shortly earlier: a spicy dram of Tamdhu 12, produced where the Spey laps at shingly river islands; a smooth Dailuaine 16, made near the stretch of river where we capsized; and a delicious Aberlour 12, whose taste is like coming in from the cold.

Speyside has produced whisky for centuries — it was far from Edinburgh taxmen and it had abundant barley to supply distilleries. The industry boomed in the 1800s with the new Excise Act of 1823, which created new licensing laws and legitimised the trade, and the introduction of railways that facilitated the export of the casks. Queen Victoria loved Speyside malts and ordered royal carriages carry a bottle 'in case of emergency'.

Whisky has only a few ingredients: water, barley, yeast. But perhaps the most important ingredient is time: in the years (even decades) the liquid spends maturing in oak casks, its flavours intensify and its value increases. The Mash Tun has a collection of Glenfarclas

THE MASH TUN
Whisky Bar
J.C.
1896
WELCOME

The Mash Tun whisky bar in Aberlour, where some of the bottles date back to the 1950s

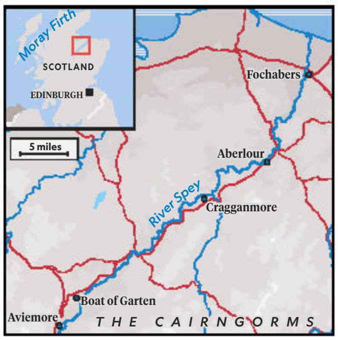
bottles dating back to the early 1950s. The youngest are a lustrous gold. The oldest are a horse-brown and cost almost £1,000 a glass. For many, tasting age-statement whisky is a form of time travel: a way to reflect on past lives, lost loves and departed friends. It summons everything that's happened in the time between the water being collected from a Speyside burn and the instant it's raised to your lips.

"You can't put a price on the story of these bottles," says Ryan. "It's something that can never be replicated in a lab."

Time slips by unnoticed as we cast off on the last leg of the river from Aberlour, past the mown lawns of country estates and under cast-iron Victorian bridges. Hours are punctuated by the plops of leaping salmon and the whipping lines of anglers who stand welly-deep in the current. Come dusk, we camp on a river island and cook haggis by a campfire. We fall asleep to the patter of rain on oak leaf and canvas and the hush of the Spey, enveloping the little island in its watery embrace.

Time eventually runs out. On our last day paddling, the Spey is messy and rain-cursed: another boat in our team capsizes; one canoer's lips turn blue. To be safe, we cut short our descent just short of the sea at Fochabers. We stack our canoes on a trailer and Jerry reflects again on the many selves of the Spey: times of spate, when the river was "a great big chocolate rollercoaster", and the great floods of the 1980s, when he went to rescue stranded sheep in his boat. These stories seem hard to imagine following the summer's drought — although, with the rain now falling, the river is gradually rising inch by inch, recovering some of its old strength.

Before I leave Speyside, I buy a bottle of 12-year-old whisky as a memento of the river. I think of how the whisky would have been made in 2010, when blizzards ranged across the Cairngorm plateau and April meltwater saw the river swell across the farmland, its waters surging down distillery pipes. And I think, too, of those 12 years when the whisky stood still, silently maturing in an oak cask as the world went by — and the river flowed on. ◻



GETTING THERE & AROUND
The starting point for descents of the Spey is the town of Aviemore. Direct trains run to Aviemore from Edinburgh Waverley and Glasgow Queen Street, both taking around three hours. The Caledonian Sleeper runs from London Euston to Aviemore. It leaves the capital just after 8pm, meaning you arrive in the Highlands before 8am — expect similar timings on the return journey. lner.co.uk scotrail.co.uk sleeper.scot

WHEN TO GO
The descent of the Spey is possible year round, but most outfits only run between April and September, when there are highs of 11-19C. Summer in Scotland is highly changeable; as well as waterproofs, pack head nets to keep away midges.

WHERE TO STAY
Cairngorm Hotel, Aviemore. From £79, B&B. cairngorm.com
Ravenscraig Guest House, Aviemore. From £75, B&B. ravenscraighouse.co.uk
Coig na Shee Guest House, Newtonmore. From £85, B&B. Two-night minimum. coignashee.co.uk

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The Living Mountain, by Nan Shepherd. RRP £9.99

HOW TO DO IT
Wilderness Scotland is an outdoor operator based in Aviemore, specialising in guided descents of the Spey over four days, with three nights wild camping, from £595 per person, full board, including transfers and equipment. Participants require at least two days of canoeing experience and are asked to muck in with work like preparing meals, moving boats and making camp. wildernessscotland.com

IMAGE: ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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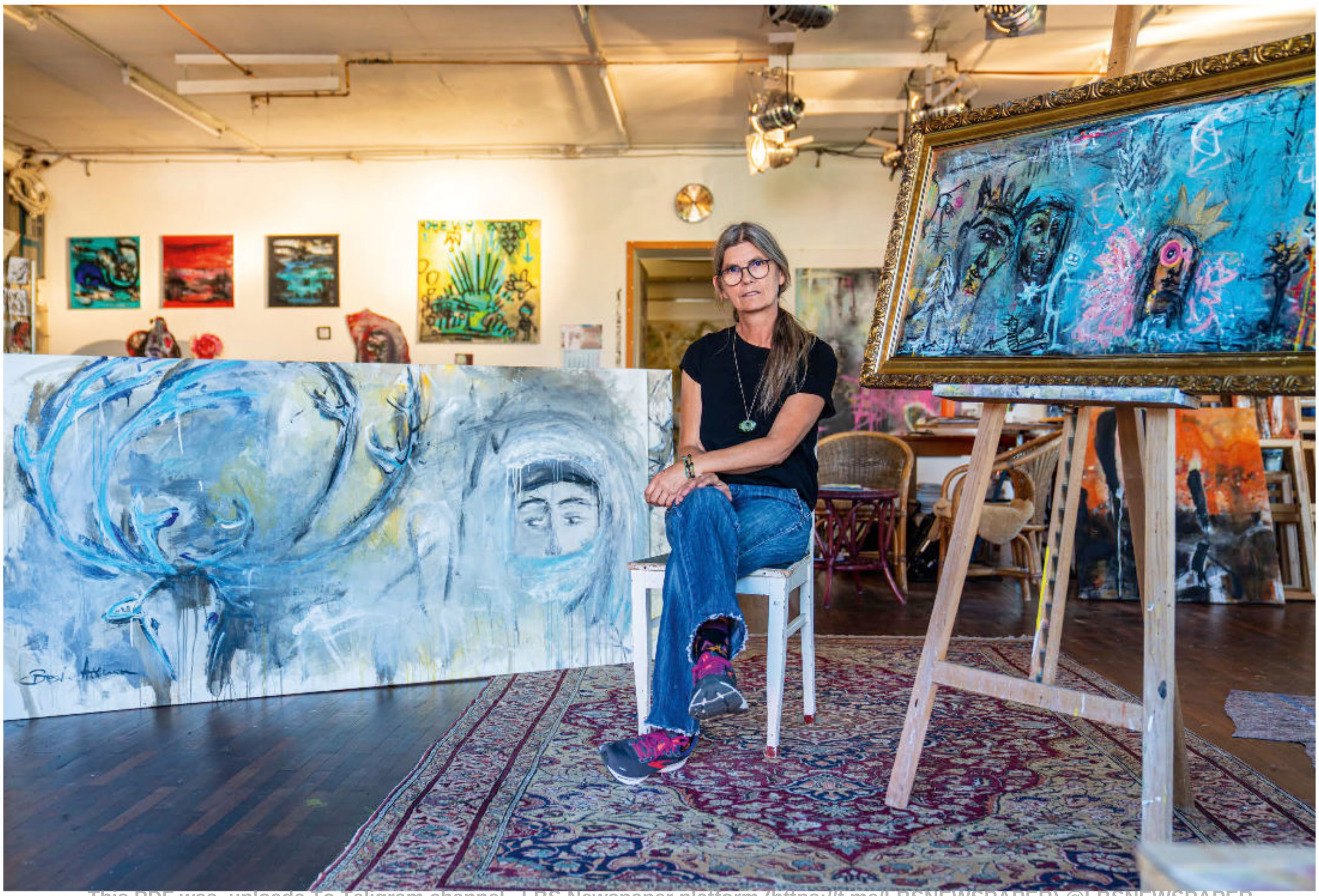
Into the woods

RINGED BY MOUNTAINS AND STEEPED IN TRADITION, THE BLACK FOREST REGION IN SOUTHWEST GERMANY HAS INSPIRED CENTURIES' WORTH OF FAIRYTALES. TODAY, ITS STORY REVOLVES AROUND CRAFTSMANSHIP, CREATIVITY AND TIME ITSELF

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: YULIA DENISYUK

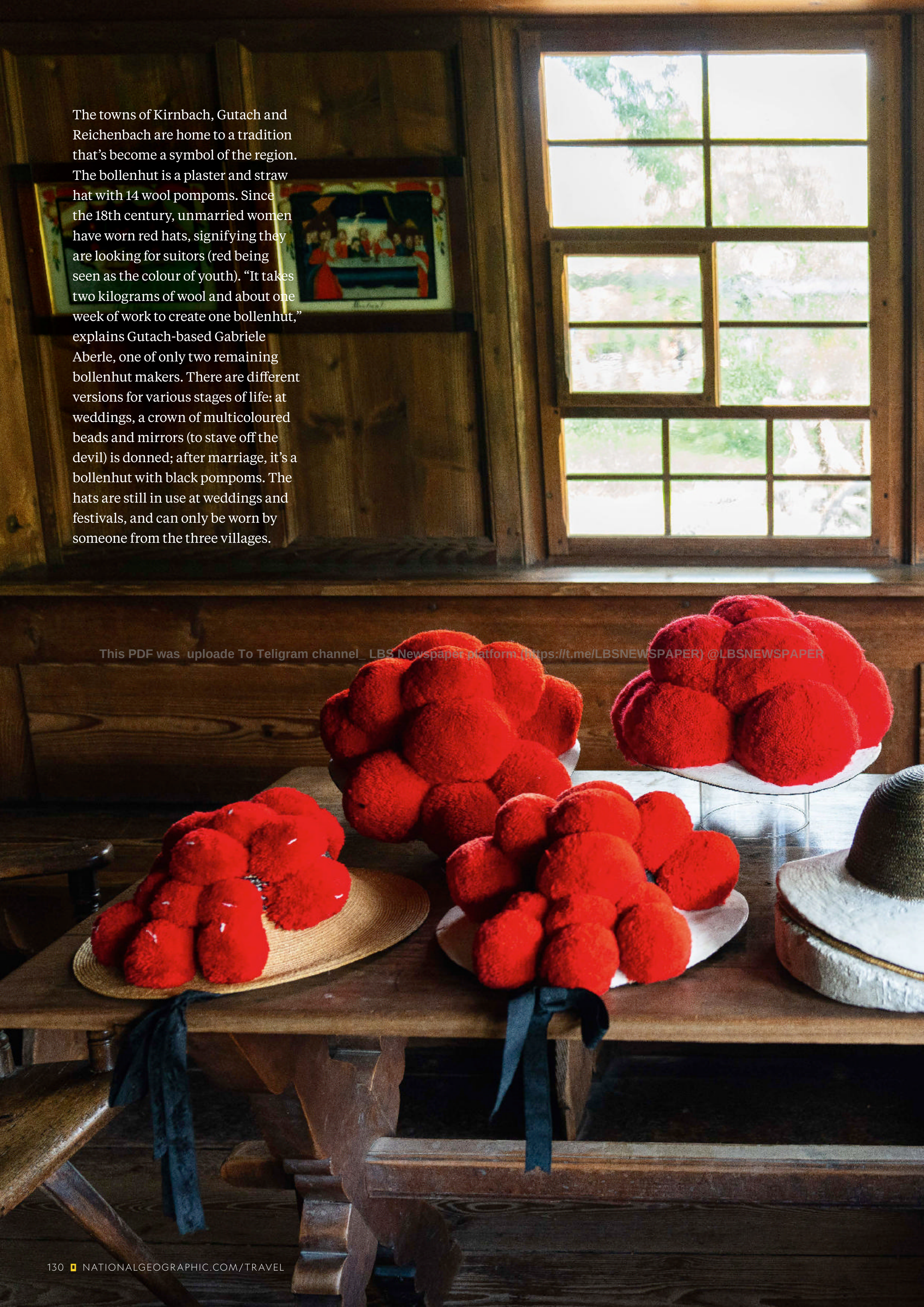
BOAR
BLACKFOREST PREMIUM DRY GIN

"The valley we're in is home to over a thousand distilleries producing schnapps — the highest concentration in Europe," says Hannes Schmidt, CEO of the Boar Distillery. He stands in the centuries-old distillery in the village of Bad Peterstal-Griesbach in the central Black Forest, explaining that the company switched from schnapps to gin a decade or so ago. Nestled on the slopes of the Rench Valley, the distillery makes limited batches using water from its own spring. And it's not just any gin — infused with 19 local botanicals, it's one of the world's most-awarded. "The secret," says Schmidt, "is in the Black Forest Burgundy truffle. We experimented for half a year to find just the right amount to add." The Boar Distillery is open for visits and tastings, but can sell out a year in advance.



“It’s important for our culture to know where we come from and where we’re going. This is what this movement is all about,” says Uwe Baumann, creator of Cosmos Black Forest, a project that brings together local artists to reinterpret Black Forest traditions. The idea was to play with traditional symbols such as the cuckoo clock and bollenhut hat, and make them relevant to modern times. “Fifteen years ago, the region was seen as old-fashioned,” adds Beate Axmann (above), a participating artist whose paintings explore themes of global migration. “Today, it’s different. We have a rich contemporary art scene.” Cosmos Black Forest creations can be found across the region, including at Kloster Hirsau, a museum set in a medieval monastery in Hirsau.

The towns of Kirnbach, Gutach and Reichenbach are home to a tradition that's become a symbol of the region. The bollenhut is a plaster and straw hat with 14 wool pompoms. Since the 18th century, unmarried women have worn red hats, signifying they are looking for suitors (red being seen as the colour of youth). "It takes two kilograms of wool and about one week of work to create one bollenhut," explains Gutach-based Gabriele Aberle, one of only two remaining bollenhut makers. There are different versions for various stages of life: at weddings, a crown of multicoloured beads and mirrors (to stave off the devil) is donned; after marriage, it's a bollenhut with black pompoms. The hats are still in use at weddings and festivals, and can only be worn by someone from the three villages.



Gabriele
Aberle

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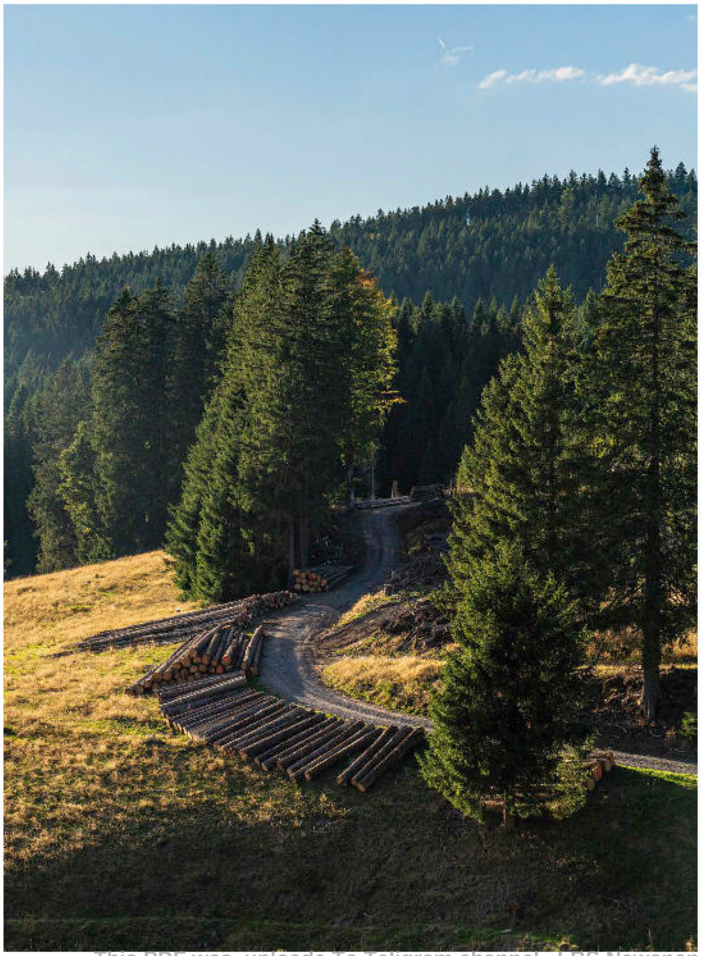
Klostermuseum

South of Gutach lies Schonach, a quiet town with a big claim to fame: it's the birthplace of the cuckoo clock. The industry developed here in the mid-18th century, with all the elements coming together to make the clock tick: local wood for the housing, plus the mechanism and the bellows responsible for the signature cuckoo sound. Conny and Ingolf Haas are the fourth-generation co-owners of cuckoo-clock-making company Rombach & Haas. "Our hearts beat cuckoo and we wanted to bring the clock back into people's living rooms," says Ingolf. "They were once considered kitsch — today, they're in again." According to Ingolf, the Black Forest has a special energy, where time stretches and problems disappear, if only for a moment. For him, that energy lives inside the cuckoo clock.



It's unclear who invented the Black Forest gateau, a cake comprising chocolate sponge layers, cream, sour cherries and *kirschwasser* (cherry schnapps). While some claim it was a baker near Bonn in 1915, Black Forest locals are quick to point out they've been making a similar dessert for centuries. Regardless of its origins, arguably the best cake is found in the village of Todtnauberg in the southern Black Forest. Here, Freddy Boch, owner of Hotel Engel, has been making the gateaux for three decades using his grandfather's recipe. Every two years, he organises the Black Forest Cake Festival, where a panel of confectioners judges over 250 cakes from all over the world. Along with other local chefs, Boch also runs Black Forest gateau-making workshops.

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South Australia & Western Australia

Ocean to Outback

Discover unforgettable wildlife experiences in South Australia and Western Australia, venturing from the coast to the bushland and beyond. Words: Amanda Smith

Clockwise from left: Sal Salis Ningaloo Reef, a luxury safari camp in Cape Range National Park, Western Australia; a safari across the Flinders Ranges, South Australia; Seal Bay Conservation Park, Kangaroo Island, South Australia

Home to some of the world's most astonishing wilderness, South Australia and Western Australia offer countless ways to experience the nation's unique wildlife — quokkas, emus, kangaroos and koalas are among the native animals that can be spotted on safari here. These special encounters can easily be combined with trips to world-class wineries, eating at farm-to-table restaurants and snorkelling in crystal-clear waters.

Using the state capitals of Adelaide and Perth as your bases, hike out into the Outback or hop on a ferry to learn more about the wild elements of Australia's ancient land, home to the world's oldest living culture.

ADELAIDE & SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Adelaide is one of Australia's most laid-back state capitals, surrounded by sandy beaches, historic wine regions and market-gardeners' farmlands. It's also just a 15-minute drive to the Morialta Conservation Park, a dreamy expanse of Australian bushland characterised by gorges and waterfalls and home to native wildlife including possums, echidnas, cockatoos, Cunningham's skinks and, of course, kangaroos.

Before venturing further afield, don't miss a jaunt to one of the state's renowned wine regions. As one of the 11 Great Wine Capitals of the world, Adelaide offers easy access to hundreds of cellar doors. For a historic experience, visit the Barossa Valley, one of Australia's oldest wine regions. Enjoy a long lunch at a winery, taste a tawny from your year of birth or join a private safari to meet the winemakers.

Five hours north of Barossa Valley is the Flinders Ranges, one of the world's most ancient landscapes. Marvel at the natural amphitheatre of Wilpena Pound and keep eyes peeled for yellow-footed rock wallabies, short-beaked echidnas, kangaroos, bearded dragons and wedge-tailed eagles exploring the striking red terrain and the skies above.

Make your way to Kangaroo Island via a 45-minute ferry ride from Cape Jervis or a 30-minute flight from Adelaide. One of the best places in Australia to spot wildlife, the island is home to kangaroos (including its own unique species of the western grey kangaroo), koalas, echidnas and an array of birdlife, as well as Australian sea lions. There's plenty more to explore, too: don't miss the geological phenomena of the Remarkable Rocks and the island's renowned local food scene.

PERTH & WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Australia's sounds are as memorable as its sights. Hear the call of the native kookaburra 'laughing' amid the birdsong chorus at Perth's Bold Park, a haven for wildlife and wildflowers close to the heart of Western Australia's state capital.

Thirty minutes by ferry from the city, Rottnest Island offers another wildlife encounter unique to this area — the chance to see Perth's famous 'locals', the native quokkas. The island measures just seven square miles, meaning the creatures are easy to spot as you roam. The surrounding clear waters, meanwhile, are ideal for snorkelling, swimming, sailing and surfing.

Further north lies Ningaloo Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Swim a few strokes and you'll be floating over the world's largest fringing reef, a thriving ecosystem of coral, fish, turtles, manta rays and dugongs. Visit from April to October and you may catch a glimpse of whale sharks and humpback whales. Nearby, the red rocks of Cape Range National Park are home to emus, rare black-footed wallabies and spiny anteaters.

Northwestern Australia is ancient and raw, and a trip to the Kimberley region is one of its greatest adventures. Bilbies, bandicoots, dingoes and crocodiles are among the species that can be seen on safaris around the Horizontal Falls, the Buccaneer Archipelago, the Bungle Bungle Range and the Echidna Chasm. If anywhere's going to turn you into a naturist and wildlife photographer, it's here.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Book your flights to South Australia and Western Australia with Malaysia Airlines and discover all Adelaide and Perth have to offer. Malaysia Airlines offers travellers fast connections, as well as the opportunity to break the journey with a free (excluding taxes) return flight to another destination on the Malaysian peninsula. For more information, visit *malaysiaairlines.com*

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IMAGES: SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND WESTERN AUSTRALIA

CITY LIFE

KYOTO

Beneath the surface of sedate geisha teahouses and hushed shrines, Kyoto is a hotbed for legendary live music — here, Japan's most unique, riotous acts are set free in the city's underground clubs, grungy dive bars and historic cafes

WORDS: DANIEL STABLES. PHOTOGRAPHS: BEN WELLER

An Irish pub is, perhaps, not the obvious place to find yourself in the cultural heart of Japan. It's with some trepidation, then, that I settle into a corner table at Field, an Irish pub above an udon restaurant in downtown Kyoto, where the door sign advertises that classic combination of 'draught Guinness, good Irish music, and curry bread of Noharaya'.

My apprehension turns out to be wildly misplaced. Over the next couple of hours, a succession of fantastically talented Japanese musicians takes to the stage, putting the fiddle, flute, banjo and tin whistle to a series of riotous jigs, reels and slides that wouldn't be out of place in the pubs of Dublin. "Europeans and Americans living in Kyoto started the Irish music sessions in pubs in the 1990s," manager Hikaru Sato tells me between tunes. "A few curious Japanese joined them, and the Irish music scene was born."

The genre was seized upon with aplomb by subsequent generations of Japanese musicians, who've taken it up with the passion, verve and skill typical of this nation of hobbyists. "Japanese people often believe that mastering something leads to enjoyment, both in work and in hobbies," says fiddle and tin-whistle player Ryo Kaneko, fresh from a rousing rendition of Egan's Polka. There's even a word for it in Japanese: *ikigai* — the sense of motivation and life force generated by the pursuit of one's passions. "Hobbies are huge here," confirms my guide, Van Milton of InsideJapan. "And when you find one, you go for it, full throttle."

The modest Irish folk scene is just the tip of the iceberg. The guidebooks speak of Kyoto with reverential awe: a city frozen in time, where robed monks sweep around hushed temples, and an opaque silence hangs above the perfect angles of Zen gardens. But there's another side to the place — one that's modern, rumbustious and irreverent to the core. By night, Kyoto is turned upside down. The city's counterculture has long been brewed in the city's music venues, locally known as 'live houses'. In the 1970s, members of the Japanese Red Army, a female-led militant communist group who aimed to overthrow the monarchy, were said to have hidden out amid the swirling smoke and dark-wood walls of Zac Baran, one of Kyoto's most famous jazz bars.

My own descent into the Kyoto nightscape continues at Urban Guild, the city's leading avant-garde music space. Fractals project off the walls. A man in a bucket hat with a ducktail beard smokes a large cigarette of dubious legality. It's a full house here tonight, spectators packed onto wooden benches — yet there are even more people standing around the stage, waiting to perform, than there are in the audience. A young man goes through some warm-up stretches; an elderly man with knee-length dreadlocks, topped with a rasta cap, repeatedly bends over and pounds his knees with his fists. They're limbering up.

The need for physical preparedness becomes apparent as the night proceeds, a marathon of modern jazz improvisation that unspools through several hours with more than 30

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献燈 木村
献燈 寅太郎
献燈 山とみ
献燈 大國屋
献燈 冨美家
献燈 田丸印房
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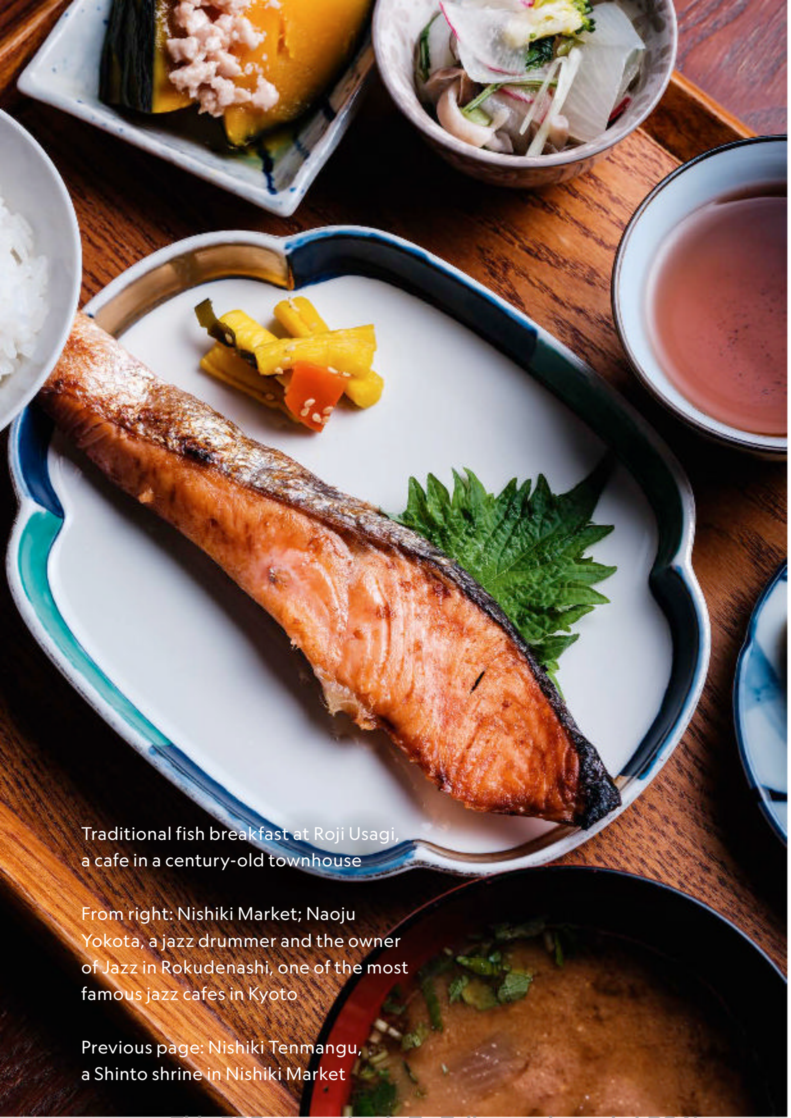

Traditional fish breakfast at Roji Usagi, a cafe in a century-old townhouse

From right: Nishiki Market; Naoju Yokota, a jazz drummer and the owner of Jazz in Rokudenashi, one of the most famous jazz cafes in Kyoto

Previous page: Nishiki Tenmangu, a Shinto shrine in Nishiki Market

performers, many of whom return to the stage time and again. The evening unfolds in an amorphous phantasmagoria of music and light. There's a circus feel, with children running amok across the stage, ducking beneath drum risers, synthesizers and microphone leads. The decibels rise; they stick their fingers in their ears. A salaryman sleeps on a corner bench.

One of the repeat performers is vocalist Fuyuco, who I chat to in between sets. She explains that Kyoto's smaller population — around half that of Osaka, and 10 times less than Tokyo — and less well-known venues have helped a different kind of music scene flourish here, compared with those found in bigger cities. "Kyoto is a small, deep city," she says. "People's connections are spread like roots; you can make a community easily here. The cost of living is also cheaper than other major cities, which is why so many experimental musicians live here."

The next day, I meet ambient music producer Ferdinand Maubert in Cavalier, a darkly stylish cocktail bar. As I quiet the embryonic thud of a hangover with Hibiki whiskies, he explains that Kyoto is at the vanguard of Japan's nascent electronic music scene. It long faced a unique stumbling block: a 1948 law, introduced to counteract the corrupting influence of US culture, which banned dancing after midnight. For long periods the police turned a blind eye, allowing nightclubs to operate semi-legally, but a series of high-profile raids in the 2010s, known as the 'War on Dance', shuttered an already stifled scene even further. Protests followed and Japan's archaic dancing ban was finally lifted in 2015.

Ferdinand tells me things are moving forward here, even if progress is slow. "When I was in Europe in the 2000s, it was all about underground raves; now everyone wants them here in Japan," he says. "Ten years ago, we were in the 1980s in Japan. Now we're in the 1990s." The ambient music scene in particular is growing, boosted by a 2022 multimedia exhibition held in Kyoto by Brian Eno, the British musician and record producer who popularised the genre in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ferdinand agrees with Fuyuco that Kyoto makes a good home for those who don't fit so easily into mainstream life in Japan. "These people choose to live a little on the margins of society," he says, "and you can do that in Kyoto — it's more affordable, and it's also close to nature." The latter is particularly important to Ferdinand, whose debut album, *Made in Kyoto*, is infused with field recordings made in the bamboo forests outside the city.

Kyoto also provides a handsome setting for music venues, with its historic architecture having been spared bombing during the Second World War. Rock 'n' roll bands shake the wooden rafters of Jittoku, a former sake brewery said to be the oldest music house in Japan, while live swing music echoes against the mosaic tiles of Sarasa Nishijin, an attractive 1930s bathhouse that's now a cafe.

INSIDER TIPS

Audiences are flocking back to Kyoto's live music venues, meaning that shows can be busy. If there's a particular act you want to see or venue you want to attend, get your name on the list early by emailing before — this will ensure you're permitted entry, although payment is usually not taken until you arrive.

It's a good idea to have a face mask with you wherever you go in Japan, and music venues are no exception. It's not a legal requirement to wear one — Japan never needed to pass such laws, since compliance was so high — but you may give a bad impression or feel uncomfortable in certain settings if you're the only person not wearing one.

Can't decide between going for dinner or catching a show? There's no need to choose at Japan's traditional live houses. Try Jittoku, where a menu of basic but hearty rice and noodle dishes can be ordered during the show, and Taku Taku, where croquettes and pancakes are on offer.

Clockwise from top: A tea ceremony at Camellia Garden, a historic home that offers private tea ceremonies near Ryōan-ji Temple; Fushimi Inari Taisha, a Shinto shrine in Kyoto; Obbli, a small cafe-bar that hosts regular live performances

Q&A with Yukari BB, DJ and manager of Jazzy Sport record store

HOW DOES KYOTO INSPIRE YOU CREATIVELY?
Kyoto is known as an ancient capital, but it also has the highest number of universities in Japan relative to its population, so it's always fresh and full of stimulation and curiosity. Art festivals, such as Kyotographie and Nuit Blanche, are held frequently throughout the year.

WHAT'S SO UNIQUE ABOUT KYOTO'S MUSIC SCENE, COMPARED WITH TOKYO OR OSAKA?
It's not necessarily highly commercial or flashy, but it's full of individuality and inquisitive minds that delve into specific music. Kyoto's musicians tend to seek quality above all else. There are many long-established workshops in Kyoto creating tofu, metalwork, kimonos, incense and more – that artisan spirit runs through the music scene, too.

WHERE ARE THE BEST PLACES TO SEE MUSIC IN KYOTO?
One of my favourites is a cosy, small reggae bar called Rub A Dub. Another is DNA Paradise; I'd say that it's the deepest music spot in Kyoto. It has a great vintage sound system and quality music. There's no sign outside, but it's worth finding!

REBEL MUSIC

'The nail that sticks out will be hammered down' — this traditional Japanese proverb is trotted out by foreign observers so often that I'm surprised to hear it repeatedly from Japanese people themselves when describing the country's collectivist, conformist society. Music, though, is a vehicle of escape for Kyotoites of a more individual bent. Walk among the canalside shophouses and cherry trees of Kiyamachi Street and you may be greeted by the striking sight and sound of Chanko Ponchi, an ex-sumo wrestler, rapping and beat-boxing in nothing but his *mawashi* (loincloth). Another individual of the Kyoto music scene is Taiji Sato, a guitar-wielding firebrand with a magnificent mane who has earned the sobriquet 'the Japanese Lenny Kravitz' and become a prominent fixture in the city's live houses.

Nowhere is Kyoto's fierce musical individuality more evident than in its upholding of the proud tradition of Japanese punk rock, spearheaded in the 1980s by acts such as Boøwy and Shonen Knife. Among those carrying the flag today are Kyoto legends Otoboke Beaver, whose brand of searing guitar punk and satirical lyrics — often damning of the narrow conservatism and familial pressures of Japanese society — has generated interest in Europe and the US and won acclaim from rock royalty Dave Grohl. "It was only after we started getting attention overseas that we were labelled as a punk band," singer Accorinrin tells me, "but maybe our attitude is punk." Perhaps, she says, this has something to do with being from Kyoto, where, as with the wider Kansai region, "people are known for being direct and outspoken".

Even here, in the modern punk scene, the influence of Kyoto's traditional arts makes itself known. Accorinrin points to *manzai*, a classical comedy form. "Kansai is the birthplace of the comedy scene in Japan, so we don't consciously think about comedy; it's just a part of us," she says. "*Manzai* is a traditional type of stand-up comedy, usually two people in a conversation — it has a rhythm, a slow and fast speed. The changing tempo fascinates us and this influences our songwriting."

As luck would have it, the band are playing a homecoming gig in Kyoto during my visit, so I duly show up at Socrates, a grungy dive bar, with my guide, Van, in tow. Sweat drips from the walls as the band rattles through a set of pulse-quickening punk, with sweet pop melodies alternating with bursts of spiky rage over spidery guitar riffs. The band's bugbears are evident in the song titles — I Won't Dish Out Salads; I Am Not Maternal; Dirty Old Fart is Waiting for My Reaction — and in the righteous fury of the lyrics, barked in Japanese and English, with lines like: "A tenacious sulky troublesome ass/Looking for a one-night stand/Creepy old fart."

"This is what happens in Japan," says Van, nodding approvingly, "when the mask comes off."

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Japanese hardcore punk band Roccon perform at Socrates dive bar

Club together
Nowhere is the city’s fierce musical individuality more evident than in its upholding of the proud tradition of Japanese punk rock

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Nishiki Market is popular for street food

14 HOURS IN

Kyoto

8AM

BREAKFAST AT ROJI USAGI

This cosy cafe in the Miyagawa-cho district is a lovely spot to plan out your day, not least because the owner is a helpful former tour guide and the walls are lined with books about Kyoto. The cafe is housed in a century-old *machiya* (townhouse) and set around a gorgeous rock garden. The menu is as traditional as the decor; feast on grilled fish, miso soup and pickled vegetables, or opt for the slightly more substantial Japanese curry. rojiusagi.com

10AM

VISIT KIYOMIZU-DERA

Among Kyoto's many splendid sights, the most impressive might well be Kyomizu-dera, a 1,200-year-old Buddhist temple that looms mightily on a forested hill in eastern Kyoto, a 15-minute walk from Roji Usagi. The main prayer hall stands on tall wooden columns, giving the illusion that it's floating above the trees. The whole place, in fact, is something of an architectural marvel, with its structures having stood since the 1600s despite being built entirely from wood and without the use of a single nail. kiyomizudera.or.jp

12PM

LUNCH AT NISHIKI MARKET

Known fondly by locals as 'Kyoto's Kitchen', the indoor Nishiki Market is a fantastic place to get a feel for the rhythms of daily life in the city, with vendors hawking fresh seafood and vegetables just as they have for 400 years. Ready-to-eat snacks are also on offer here for an unforgettable lunch: try tempura skewers of shrimp and conger eel, and don't miss *tako tamago* — a baby octopus stuffed with a boiled quail's egg, a delicacy that originated here in the market.

2PM

EXPERIENCE A JAZZ KISSA

The jazz *kissa* is a uniquely Japanese phenomenon: atmospheric cafes where the order of the day is to sit quietly and appreciate carefully curated jazz records. Originating in the 1920s, many have an atmosphere largely unchanged to this day. Jazz in Rokudenashi is one of the most famous, with dark-wood walls covered with vintage prints and magazines, and one of the finest collections of jazz in Kyoto. Spend a couple of hours here over a coffee or Japanese whisky. rokude.com

Drinking religiously

At Bozu Bar, you can talk (and drink) whisky and sake with the owner, who's also a Buddhist monk and head priest of Myoyu Kuonji in west Kyoto

Kiyomizu-dera, a 1,200-year-old Buddhist temple

4PM

MARVEL AT FUSHIMI INARI TAISHA

No visit to Kyoto is complete without a trip to the city's most famous Shinto shrine complex, Fushimi Inari Taisha. Thousands of vermilion-coloured *torii* gates unfold up a mountainside in sets, like fallen decks of cards; as you walk through them, stopping off at shrines on the way, you'll notice they're flanked by dozens of statues of sly foxes, which in Shinto mythology represent guardians of Inari, the deity of fertility, rice, sake and tea. In exchange for a small donation, you can receive a miniature *torii* gate of your own, to leave as an offering at one of the complex's many shrines. inari.jp

6PM

DISCOVER THE WORLD OF NOH

Before exploring more of Kyoto's modern music scene, pay homage to its classical arts at the Kanze Noh Theatre. *Noh* is a form of dance-drama that originated in the 14th century, which involves performers donning striking masks to act out folk tales, songs and comic skits. Although it's one of the oldest theatrical forms still practised today, it's far from a stuffy affair and the tales of ghosts, gods and monsters — as well as the gags — can transcend any language barrier. kyoto-kanze.jp

8PM

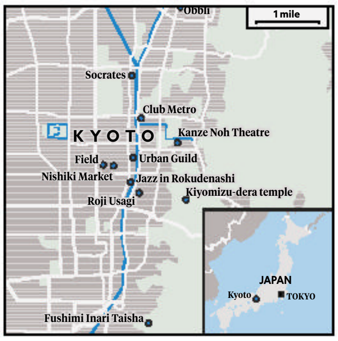
DINNER AND MUSIC AT OBBLI

Tacos might not be what you expect to find in Kyoto, but they do them superbly at cafe-bar Obbli, with classic Mexican dishes — *carnitas* (pulled pork), beef *picadillo* (a tomato-based dish), *pico de gallo* (a type of salsa) — presented with a Japanese eye for aesthetics (blue corn tortillas and bright pink pickled onions, for instance). Run by music obsessive Tani Haruya, Obbli has the feel of a cosy living room, lined with bookcases and plastered with vintage music posters, and there are regular live performances of folk, jazz, rock and more. twitter.com/obbli0616

10PM

DIVE INTO KYOTO'S NIGHTLIFE

Launched in 1990, Club Metro is said to be the oldest nightclub in Japan. Open every night of the week and featuring a rotating roster of DJs and live acts from Japan and beyond, it's a fantastic place to begin your exploration of Kyoto's nightlife. Erstwhile denizens include jazz crossover legends Kyoto Jazz Massive, American bassist Thundercat and French electronic duo Daft Punk, and the club remains a creative breeding ground for new and established acts alike. metro.ne.jp ◼



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways, Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways fly direct from London to Tokyo daily, from where it's easy to connect to Kyoto by bullet train (2hrs 15mins). ba.com jal.co.jp ana.co.jp

Average flight time: 14h.

It's possible to explore Downtown Kyoto on foot, but for sights further afield it's easy to get around using the city's efficient subway system. The bus network is also very easy to use. The Kansai One pass, available at subway and train stations or convenience stores, gives unlimited travel on buses and trains in Kyoto and the wider Kansai region. kansaionepass.com

WHEN TO GO

Spring is a beautiful time to visit Kyoto, with average temperatures of 14C in April and the city's trees smothered in cherry blossom, but it's also a very busy time of year. Summers are humid and average 33C in August, while autumn often has mild weather – highs of 23C in October – without the crowds of spring, and with gorgeous foliage colours. Winter is often cloudy, windy and rainy, with a January average temperature of 10C.

WHERE TO STAY

Hyatt Regency Kyoto, Sanjusangendomawari neighbourhood. Doubles from £220, B&B. hyatt.com

Mercure Kyoto Station, Aburanokojicho neighbourhood. Doubles from £120, B&B. mercure-kyoto-station.com

MORE INFO

kyoto.travel

Rough Guide to Japan. RRP: £18.99

HOW TO DO IT

InsideJapan can tailor a trip to Kyoto, offering three nights at the Royal Park Hotel from £480 per person, B&B, with a day of private tours and experiences, including a private tea ceremony. Excludes flights. insidejapantours.com

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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CITY LIFE

CAPE TOWN

South Africa's 'Mother City' has shaken off its post-pandemic funk and is welcoming visitors with exciting hotel openings, shiny new restaurants and its evergreen natural beauty

WORDS: ZANE HENRY. PHOTOGRAPHS: YANN MACHEREZ

There are a few things you immediately notice when arriving in Cape Town. The first is Table Mountain — an omnipresent, flat-topped massif rearing up above the Atlantic seaboard, wrapping itself around the city, presiding over everything with reassuring solidity.

The second is that the city centre itself is relatively small, spread across a mere handful of blocks. This compactness is less by design and more a physical necessity. Cape Town started out as a halfway station for Dutch and Portuguese spice traders on their way around the southern tip of Africa to India in the 1600s. Ideally placed, it sprung up sandwiched between the sea and that huge massif.

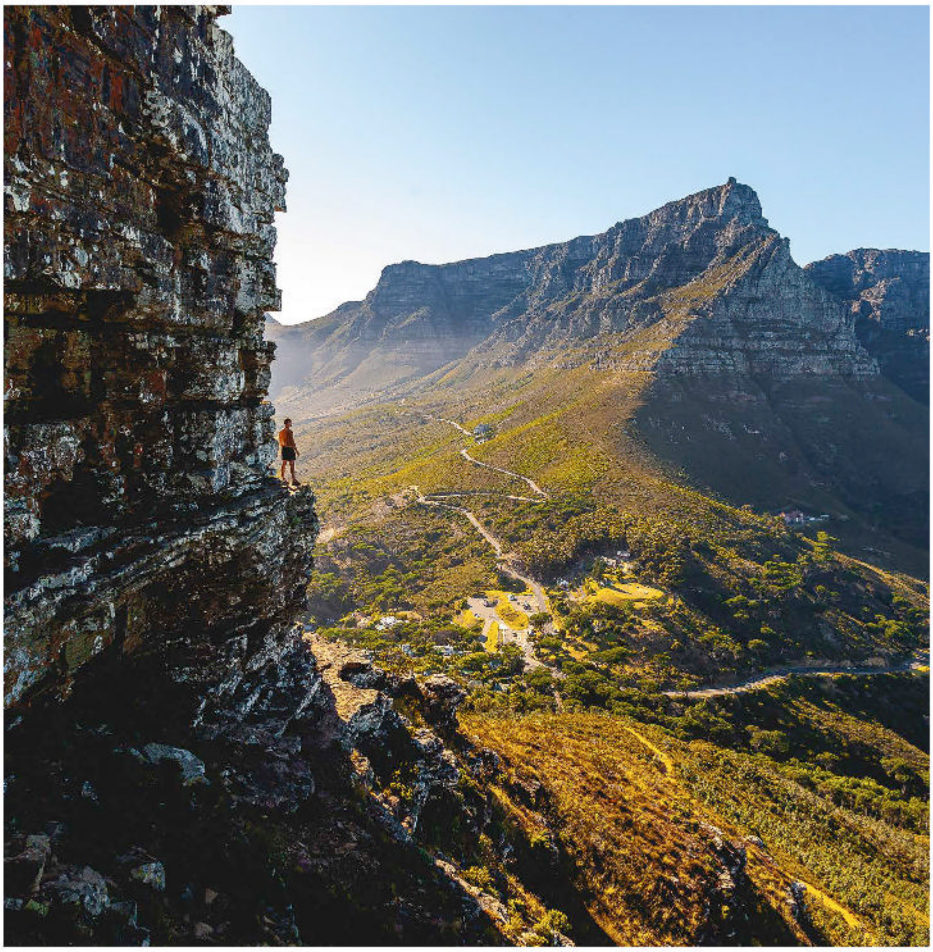
To grow, the city had to spill out into neighbourhoods beyond the foothills of Table Mountain. Each has retained its own distinct personality, while remaining indelibly part of the city. There's Observatory's chilled hippy vibes; recently gentrified Woodstock; the beach resort feel of Camps Bay; the sleepy coffeeshops of Sea Point; and the genteel bohemia of Hout Bay — all within easy reach of the centre.

The other thing you can't help but notice is the lived reality of its inhabitants. Cape Town is still grappling with a history of segregation, economic hardship and rumours of ongoing government corruption. There's the omnipresent loadshedding (regular scheduled power cuts stemming from poor infrastructure) and Covid-19 has left vivid scars in the tourism industry, from which it's still recovering.

For better or worse, little of this filters down to the visitor's experience. The city remains perennially popular with international travellers, and for good reason. The people are unflappably friendly and welcoming, eager to share and show off their city's staggering natural beauty.

That beauty is woven into the city's DNA. Highways wind around the foot of Devil's Peak, and the Atlantic Ocean is visible from virtually every street corner. A 10-minute drive from the centre and you'll be flopped out on Clifton Beach's powdery white sands, while the Eden-like green hills and unique flora of Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden are ripe for exploration on the other side of the mountain. You can take a 40-minute walk from the shops and restaurants of the blockbuster V&A Waterfront to dunk yourself in Sea Point's tidal pool, before heading to Camps Bay for sundowners at a beach bar.

And it's all within the comforting shade of Table Mountain, of course. Always reassuringly, unassailably there.



Clockwise from left: The western edge of Table Mountain; room at Future Found Sanctuary; Zeitz MOCAA gallery; a dish at Salsify at the Roundhouse; a bar at The Old Biscuit Mill

Previous pages: a mixologist at work at speakeasy The Art of Duplicity

SEE & DO

FIRST THURSDAYS: On the first Thursday of each month, the city's busiest streets in the City Bowl, East City and Silo District are locked off to traffic and Cape Town turns into the ideal version of itself: walkable and accessible. Galleries, restaurants and bars stay open until late, encouraging people to hang around the the city centre after work. Expect window-rattling performances from musicians and DJs, food stalls and a general street party vibe. first-thursdays.co.za

ZEITZ MOCAA: Located in the fashionable Silo district of the V&A Waterfront, this world-class gallery and museum is home to an extraordinary collection of art from all over Africa — the largest of its kind in the world. Rotating temporary exhibitions sit alongside a dedicated permanent collection in this former grain silo, now a multi-floor bastion of art and design. zeitzmocaa.museum

TABLE MOUNTAIN: Somehow, you never quite get used to the sight of Cape Town's most iconic landmark looming over the City Bowl. While you can hike up one of its many trails in three to five hours, the cable car to the summit provides arguably better views through its 360-degree glass walls. Keep an eye out for the dassies (adorable rodent-like mammals) that live on its slopes. tablemountain.net

DISTRICT SIX MUSEUM: District Six was a cosmopolitan community at the foot of Table Mountain that defied the government's attempts at social segregation. Apartheid's Group Areas Act designated it a whites-only area in 1966, leading to its 60,000 non-white inhabitants being evicted and scattered across the barren Cape Flats while their former homes were bulldozed. This museum honours the community with installations and exhibitions, as well as poignant guided tours by former residents. districtsix.co.za

KIRSTENBOSCH NATIONAL BOTANICAL GARDEN: Sprouting across the eastern slopes of Table Mountain, this botanical garden is overflowing with indigenous flora, including a collection of rare proteas, the national flower. From November to April, the gardens become truly unmissable when, every Sunday, South African and international music acts play into the sunset in one of the world's most beautiful settings. sanbi.org/gardens/kirstenbosch

WOODSTOCK STREET ART TOUR: Woodstock used to be one of the rougher parts of town, but has been reinvigorated with the opening of spots like The Old Biscuit Mill food and craft hub, hip distilleries and art galleries. The best way for visitors to explore the neighbourhood's prodigious amount of street art and graffiti is to take a walking tour. Guides with JUMA Art Tours provide valuable context and insight into the community. jumaarttours.co.za

1
2
MOCA

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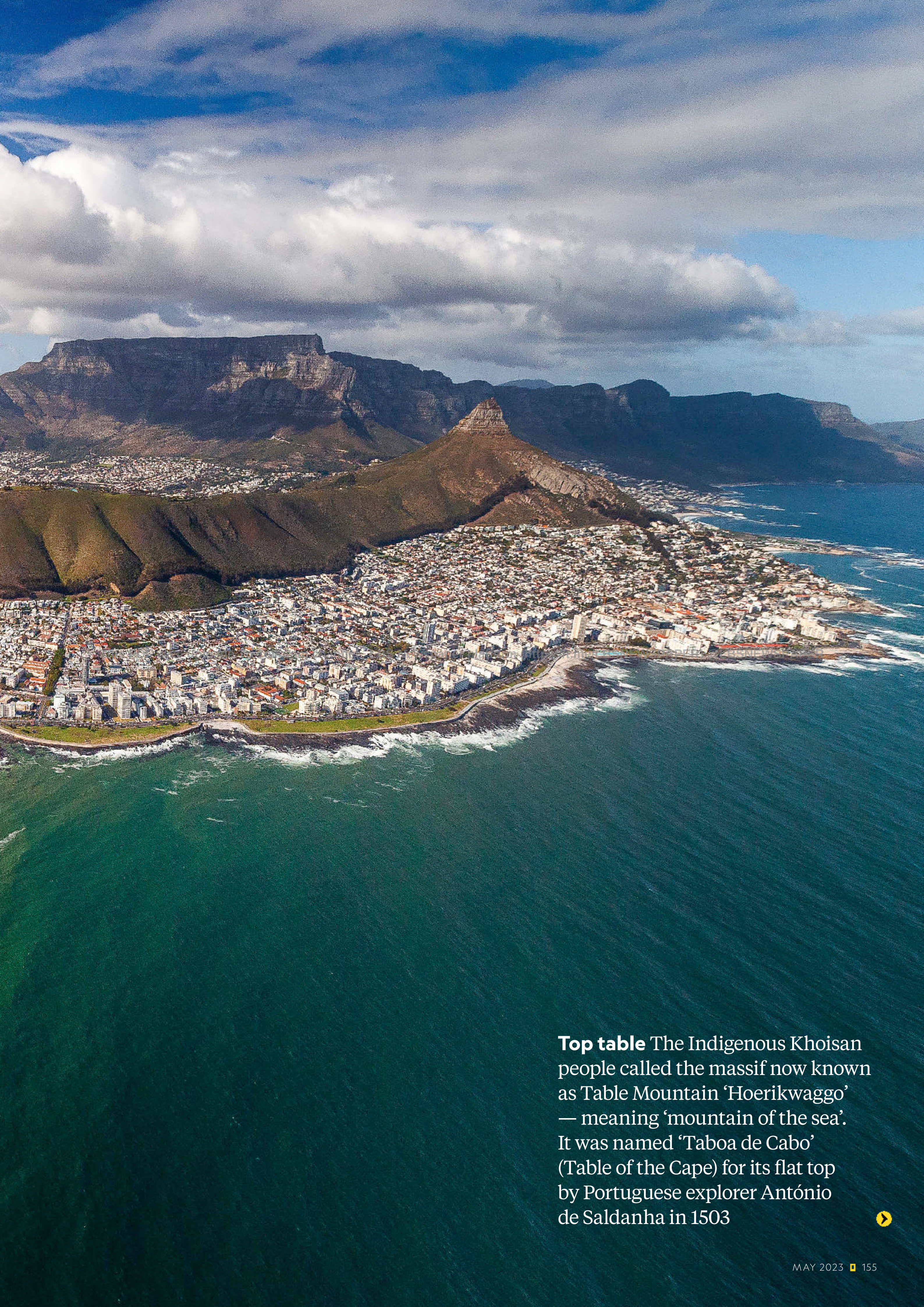
Founded in the 17th century, Cape Town grew up between the ocean and Table Mountain



Top table The Indigenous Khoisan people called the massif now known as Table Mountain ‘Hoerikwaggo’ — meaning ‘mountain of the sea’. It was named ‘Taboa de Cabo’ (Table of the Cape) for its flat top by Portuguese explorer António de Saldanha in 1503

UPERNAVIK

Witness the intricate patterns of sea ice

The people of North Greenland are experiencing declining sea ice, which is impacting their livelihoods and culture

Come and hear their stories

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Photo: Aningaaq R. Carlsen, Visit Greenland

bettél
Handcrafted in Cape Town

Watershed Market is home to about 150 local artisans, who make items such as clothes and jewellery

BUY

THE NEIGHBOURGOODS MARKET: On weekend mornings, head to Neighbourgoods Market in The Old Biscuit Mill in Woodstock. The waft from Ethiopian pancakes, Philly-style cheesesteaks and Cape Malay curries duel in the air, while artisans sell everything from rooibos-tea-infused organic chocolate to contemporary riffs on traditional *shweshwe* skirts. neighbourgoodsmarket.co.za

THE BOOK LOUNGE: Cape Town's best independent bookstore is the perfect place to browse for some holiday reading. Sunlight slants in through huge windows, dancing among the high shelves. There's a large range of African and South African literature, as well as regular book launches for local authors. booklounge.co.za

WATERSHED MARKET: This market in a converted warehouse occupies a brilliant location at the V&A Waterfront. The focus is on South African and pan-African design, with around 150 traders selling jewellery, crafts, clothing and beauty products. While browsing, be sure to make the effort to talk to the vendors and hear their stories. waterfront.co.za

SLEEP

£ **THE WINCHESTER HOTEL:** This grand dame is now even grander after an extensive renovation. Located in a prime beachfront spot opposite Sea Point's Promenade, the century-old building has been updated to modern boutique standards while retaining its excellent bone structure. Do as the locals do and work your way through a bottle of wine on the sun-soaked terrace. newmarkhotels.com

££ **DORP HOTEL:** Dorp has a lofty location at the top of Signal Hill and offers unparalleled views of the city. The vibe is remarkably approachable, considering how grand it all looks. There's a delightfully off-kilter aesthetic in its cluster of Georgian-style buildings, with vintage furniture and tons of plants occupying the hotel's bright, light-filled spaces. dorp.co.za

£££ **FUTURE FOUND SANCTUARY:** The prospect at this haven in Hout Bay is full-spectrum wellness, from food to fitness. It's got world-class facilities but the real draw is the bucolic location. Set off on a morning hike to a waterfall, wander the grounds under the frangipani trees or just nod off next to the pool. futurefoundsanctuary.com

EAT

£ **SONNY & IRENE:** A fine addition to the city's brunch scene, this cafe-bakery in Sea Point nimbly straddles the line between kitsch and chic. The colour scheme is blush pink and emerald green, with flamingo designs popping up on pillars and plants spilling from golden pots. The green pea pancake with poached eggs, marinated feta and tomato relish is recommended. sonnyandirene.co.za

££ **UPPER UNION:** In a venerable heritage building just off Kloof Street, this new bar/restaurant/hotel has made a big impact with its potluck dining style. The menu is filled with local touches like Karoo lamb and Boland cheese. The decor has a distinct art deco vibe, with a deep green and gold palette. upperunion.co.za

£££ **SALSIFY AT THE ROUNDHOUSE:** Salsify's tasting menu is bold and pioneering, but what truly sets it apart is the deft level of restraint with premium local ingredients such as abalone and South African Wagyu beef. Go for the 'Gem' wine pairing to sample rare vintages while being dazzled by the wrap-around Atlantic views granted by the uplifting Camps Bay location. salsify.co.za

A sunset concert at Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden

AFTER HOURS

THE ART OF DUPLICITY: While the theatrics of speakeasy bars (hidden doorways, secret passwords, manufactured exclusivity, etc) may not be for everyone, this places transcends the debate with excellent drinks and brilliant bartenders. Its boho-vintage look is halfway between a factory loading dock and a French boudoir — all artfully mismatched furniture, ornate drapery and low lighting. There's also live jazz on weekends. 170120.co.za

THE WAITING ROOM: A stalwart on Long Street in the pulsing heart of the city, The Waiting Room is a chilled rooftop bar and nightclub that hosts local bands and DJs. The elbow-to-elbow dancefloor inside can be a sweaty affair, making the rooftop terrace with its glowing lanterns and comfy seating a much-needed respite when you need to rest your feet. instagram.com/waitingroom.ct

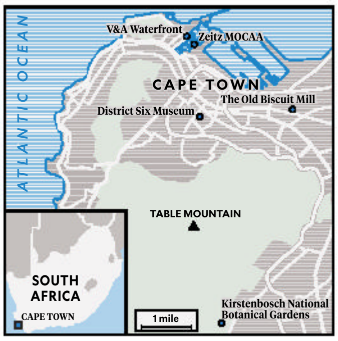
THE ARMCHAIR THEATRE: This event space in Observatory has remained one of Cape Town's best spots for live music, comedy and theatre. It received a lick of paint in a recent renovation, but the vibe is still appealingly grungy, with little space between the stage and audience. There's also karaoke, if you feel like grabbing the mic yourself. ourarmchair.co.za

LIKE A LOCAL

SEA POINT PROMENADE: This 3.5-mile walkway wends from the V&A Waterfront, past fashionable Mouille Point, and ends up near Sea Point Swimming Pool. On weekends, all of Cape Town seems to be on the promenade. Joggers, dogwalkers, families — they're all here, misted in the spray from the Atlantic hitting the sea walls. Somehow, it always feels sunnier here than anywhere else in the city. capetown.travel/the-sea-point-promenade

COSY CORNER: Elbow your way through the after-work throng at this Wynberg institution, which is the place to go for Capetonian junk food of the highest order. It looks like a British greasy spoon, but smells of peri-peri and deep-fried samosas. Try Cape Malay mainstays like the mighty Gatsby (a monster of a sandwich filled with chips, masala-fried steak, fried egg and cheese). cosycornertakeaway.co.za

MUIZENBERG FLEA MARKET: Despite its beautiful setting on the Muizenberg beachfront, this sprawling market is very much a local haunt, filled with rickety stalls selling knick-knacks, plumbing equipment, traditional crafts, clothing, handmade toys and everything else under the sun. When you get hungry, snack on a local favourite — fresh pineapple on a stick dusted with chilli salt. ▫



GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly nonstop from Heathrow and Gatwick. ba.com virgin-atlantic.com

Average flight time: 12h.

Use a rented car or Uber to get around day to day, while traditional taxis and shuttles are fine for airport transfers. Parking on the street requires interactions with 'car guards' who will expect a tip. MyCiTi buses are generally safer and more reliable than conventional buses and minibus taxis, while crime can be a concern on Metrorail trains. Avoid public transport at night for safety.

WHEN TO GO

Cape Town has a Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers with average temperatures of up to 28C in January. Winters are wet and cool. Late spring (October–November) is particularly pleasant, as it sidesteps the blistering temperatures and seasonal crowds of high summer. From the beginning of December to the end of February, the city gets particularly busy with South Africans from other parts of the country taking their annual seaside breaks.

MORE INFO

capetown.travel

The Rough Guide to Cape Town, the Winelands & the Garden Route. RRP: £13.99

Buckingham Palace, District Six, by Richard Rive. RRP: £8.95

HOW TO DO IT

Free Walking Tours Cape Town uses experienced guides to take groups on 1½-hour themed walks, with options including the Historic City Tour, Apartheid to Freedom Tour and the Bo Kaap Tour. Bookings aren't required for groups of fewer than 10 people. freewalkingtourscapetown.co.za

Intrepid Travel also offers a five-day Cape Town and the Winelands itinerary, including meals, accommodation and activities from £923 per person, excluding flights. intrepidtravel.com

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER

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DALMATIA

Down by the river

We round up six of the best experiences to try in and around the Cetina Valley, Croatia's adventure hotspot — from rafting through a canyon or whizzing down one the country's longest zip lines. Words: Jane Foster

The pull of the Mediterranean is strong in Central Dalmatia. Most visitors to this Croatian region arrive through Split, a poster child for this coastline's clear waters and languid lifestyle. But head inland, and you'll discover a destination that offers something a little more thrilling. Here, the Cetina River snakes south for 65 miles from the Dinaric Alps to the Adriatic, offering a natural playground for intrepid travellers; activities from canyoning to rock climbing are all on offer. Most tours are half-day long and include transfers.

HIKE TO THE EYE OF THE EARTH

For many, the highlight of a hike along the Cetina is Veliko Vrilo — or the Eye of the Earth, as the river's source is also known. This rocky pool owes its nickname to its oval shape and turquoise shades, which are best admired from the surrounding hills. Keen to explore further afield? From here, the river runs across a flat grassland — Croatia's only breeding site for the redshank, a bird that can be spotted nesting in the marsh. Passing Peruća Lake, the Cetina then reaches the town of Trilj, where a pretty, poplar-shaded footpath follows the riverbank. Further downstream, in the town of Omiš, by the river mouth, a steep, rocky trail leads up to a 15th-century fortress; the bird's-eye views over the Adriatic are well worth the trek.

GLIDE THROUGH A CANYON

The Cetina River runs through a canyon, its flow busy shaping the stone walls as it has for thousands of years. Take this all in with a canoeing or rafting tour. Most of them begin in the village of Zadvarje, near the deepest section of the gorge, and run for around six miles down smooth rapids, with a couple of bigger drops possible depending on the excursion. On the calmer sections of the river, look out for peregrine falcons and Eurasian eagle-owls, which nest in the rocky cliffs, as well as turtles and brown trout in the clear water below.

ABSEIL BY A WATERFALL

For a more high-octane challenge, join one of several canyoning tours, which also tend to start from Zadvarje. You'll wade through the river and rapids, diving into pools and swimming under waterfalls, with the volume of the river increasing as you make your way down the canyon. The more extreme canyoning experiences include abseiling down a cliff next to the 164ft-high Gubavica Waterfall.

FLY DOWN A MILE-LONG ZIP-LINE

Near the mouth of the Cetina River, just two miles upstream from Omiš, you'll find one of the country's longest zip-lines. A series of eight steel cables crisscross the river, covering a total distance of around one mile, whizzing daredevils back and forth across the canyon. If it's adrenaline you're after, expect to reach speeds of up to 40mph as you dash between cliffsides that, in places, reach heights of approximately 490ft. Guided tours from the centre of Omiš run all day throughout the summer season and by appointment during the rest of the year.

RIDE LIKE A LOCAL

Communities in the Dalmatian hinterland have been breeding and training horses for centuries, making riding tours a way to discover both the regional landscape and local culture. Stables near Trilj offer treks through woodland and meadows along the riverbank — an activity that's especially lovely in the late afternoon. If you're visiting in August, time your trip to coincide with the Alka Tournament, an annual fixture in the town of Sinj since the 18th century. Included on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list, this medieval chivalry competition sees participants dress up as knights and ride at full gallop through the town, aiming lances at an iron ring hanging on a rope.

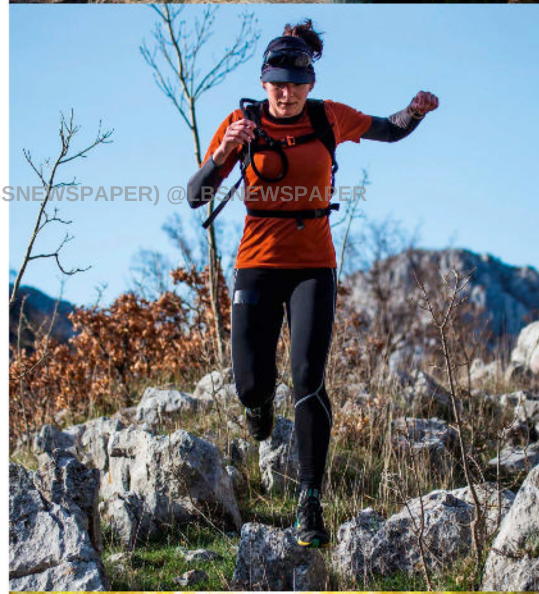
ROCK CLIMB WITH SEA VIEWS

Take one glance at Omiš and you'll realise why rock climbing is the local pastime of choice. Located at the end of the canyon, where the Cetina River flows out into the Adriatic, this quiet port town is backdropped by barren, towering boulders of grey rock — arguably one of the most dramatic sights of the Dalmatian coastline. Rock climbing outings on the canyon walls are open to all abilities, thanks to over 400 routes of varying difficulty. Tours start in Omiš and run year-round.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Various airlines operate direct flights from London to Split, Dalmatia's largest city. For more information, visit *dalmatia.hr*

CENTRAL
DALMATIA



IMAGES: SPLIT AND DALMATIA COUNTRY TOURIST BOARD

TRAVEL TALK

ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THE ANSWERS…

THE EXPERTS

Jonny Bealby
Founder of Wild Frontiers

Sam McManus
Founder of YellowWood Adventures

Jessie Hewitson
Author of *Autism: How to Raise a Happy Autistic Child*

Amanda Canning
Deputy editor, *National Geographic Traveller* (UK)

Angela Dove
Travel insurance expert, MoneySuperMarket

Clockwise from above: The Passu Valley and Karakoram Mountains, Pakistan; looking out over the Brecon Beacons

This PDF was uploade To Telegram channel LBS Newspaper platform(https://[illegible]LBSNEWSPAPER) @LBSNEWSPAPER

I'm planning two weeks in Pakistan with a friend. We're both first-time visitors and keen to experience local culture and go hiking. Any recommendations?
Pakistan is one of the most physically beautiful, historically rich and culturally fascinating countries on the planet — little wonder it was where we set up Wild Frontiers 25 years ago. It is, in our opinion, adventure travel's best-kept secret.

As well as the Kalash Valleys, Chitral and Hunza [see next answer], we also recommend getting further east, to the cities of Gilgit and Skardu. In Baltistan region, you'll find a landscape offering not only some of the world's best treks (such as the epic Concordia K2 Base Camp trek) but also, in Khaplu Palace and Shigar Fort, two of the subcontinent's best palace hotels. If time is tight, consider staying at Shigar Fort and doing a couple of shorter three-day treks.

One final recommendation: add on time to explore Lahore. Here, among the Mughal forts, mosques and palaces, in the teeming bazaars and in the modern art galleries, the heart of Pakistan comes to life. It's well worth a visit.

The fourteen-night Journey to the Roof of the World tour costs from £2,950 per person, including domestic flights. wildfrontierstravel.com

JONNY BEALBY

First head to the hiker's paradise of the Hunza Valley, deep in the Karakoram Mountains. Don't miss the Eagle's Nest viewpoint looking out over seven 7,000m peaks; the women-run carpentry shop KADO; and Ganish village, inhabited for over a thousand years. Next travel to the Chitral Valley in the Hindu Kush. Alexander the Great's army is believed to have conquered this region, and its Kalash people still maintain ancient Greek traditions. Be sure to visit the Swat Valley for its Buddhist monuments. It's also a centre for artisans including weavers and potters.

Finally, don't miss the stunning Yasin Valley in the Hindu Raj Mountains, where time seems to have stood still: machinations of espionage between Russia and Britain, played out here and across Central Asia in the 1870s, are still discussed in the tearooms as if they happened yesterday.

A fourteen-night cultural walking tour costs from £2,999 per person, excluding flights. yellowwoodadventures.com

SAM MCMANUS

IMAGES: GETTY

One of my children is autistic, and we'd like to organise a family holiday either in the UK or abroad. Where would you recommend we try? Routine, structure and planning are very important to an autistic child. My son is autistic, and our family recently went on holiday in North Devon to a place called North Hayne Farm, which he loved. It's run by an ex-school teacher, and offers a clear structure to the day (for example feeding the animals at the same times), pictures of all the cottages which you can download from the website, and loads of outdoor activities. They even have a ready-made visual timetable that you can request, with laminated pictures of the activities you will be doing. Oh, and there's a hot tub. An autistic friend also loves Center Parcs because of the combination of the woods, which provide an environment largely free of sensory stressors, and the well-trained staff. northhaynefarmcottages.co.uk centerparcs.co.uk

If you are travelling abroad, make sure you get a lanyard and tell the airport your child is autistic and struggles with the queues. There are also visual stories or videos that you can download from airport websites, which can help. But my main advice is: if you find somewhere your child half likes – despite the interruption to their routine, and everything that is familiar to them – keep going to that place. Discovering the new can be overrated, particularly if you're autistic.

JESSIE HEWITSON

I want to get away from it all on a camping trip to Wales – can you recommend any car-free sites with lots of space? You've certainly chosen the right country – Wales has some phenomenal campsites on vast, unspoilt patches of land. Let's start in Carmarthenshire. With views of the Brecon Beacons and the Cambrian Mountains, there aren't many better outlooks than from the 10 pitches at Dark Skies Camping. There are 40 acres at your disposal here, sweeping over a valley swathed in wildflower meadows and woodland. As night falls, you'll see why the site gets its name – this is prime star-gazing territory. From £36. darkskiescamping.wales

Heading west is the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and Preseli Glamping. It's a mile from Abermawr beach and you can camp on the hillside for coastal views or find a shaded spot in the wooded valley. If you'd rather leave the work of setting up a tent to someone else, there's a glamping dome here too with wood-burner and double bed. From £25; glamping from £80. preseliglamping.co.uk

Finally, how about a site with 31 acres and just two pitches? That's what on offer at Gyfyng Smallholding in Snowdonia. Each plot comes with a bell tent sleeping five, its own cookhouse, table, hammock and fire pit. You'll have rivers to swim in, hills to climb and a woodland to wander. The beaches of the Llyn Peninsula and the peaks of Eyri are also on the doorstep. From £133. gyfyngsmallholding.com

AMANDA CANNING

What sort of travel insurance do I need if I'm away for more than 30 days?

Most travel insurance policies cover trips up to 31 days, so if you're planning a longer trip, you'll need long-stay travel insurance. These policies usually cover trips lasting up to 18 months, with similar cover to a standard policy.

There are different types of long-stay policy, including backpacker insurance, over-50s and over-70s long-stay travel insurance. The right type of policy, and the cost, will depend on different factors, like your age, health, trip length, where you're going, what you're taking and your plans while there.

When comparing quotes, make sure you've got the right cover for your needs. Do you have enough cancellation cover for the total cost of your trip? Have you included any activities you'll be doing, such as winter sports? Do you have enough medical cover for the countries you'll visit? If you're working abroad, check the policy will cover you if you have an accident. Is the single-item limit on personal possessions cover enough to replace your valuables, too? Will you be able to afford your excess payment if you need to claim? Check if you need to have booked your return ticket before you travel.

You can get long-stay cover if you have a pre-existing condition but be sure to state your medical condition when getting quotes. Don't be tempted to leave it out to bring the cost down because doing so could invalidate your cover.

ANGELA DOVE

THE INFO

Europe's night trains

REVAMPED ROUTES, NEW DESTINATIONS AND SHINY MODERN CARRIAGES: SLEEPER TRAINS ARE ON TRACK TO LEAD EUROPE'S RAIL REVOLUTION IN 2023

THREE NEW DESTINATIONS

BLACK FOREST

Stuttgart, on the fringes of the Black Forest, will have a variety of new connections in 2023, with Nightjet and EuroNight services to the likes of Venice, Vienna and Zagreb

FRENCH ALPS

The venerable Venice Simplon-Orient-Express will visit the French Alps for the first time in winter 2023, with overnight trains from Paris for passengers seeking luxury rail travel

CINQUE TERRE

The new Nightjet service from Munich puts travellers within reach of Italy's clifftop Riviera fishing villages, with a direct connection to the nearby towns of Levanto and La Spezia

IN NUMBERS

143 mph

The top speed reached by the new sleeper trains ordered by Austrian operator ÖBB Nightjet, the first batch of which enter service in 2023 on routes to Italy

516 miles

The length of Scotland's North Coast 500 route, which has partnered with the Caledonian Sleeper to encourage more visitors to travel via night train

24 hours

The journey time between London and Stockholm. Take the Eurostar to Brussels for connections to Hamburg then the SJ night train to Stockholm

6.1kg

The carbon footprint of an ÖBB Nightjet from Zurich to Vienna; the equivalent trip by plane would be a 262kg carbon-emitting journey

INSTEAD OF HAVING A RESTAURANT CAR, NEW NIGHTJET SERVICES DELIVER DISHES DIRECTLY TO YOUR SEAT – OPTIONS INCLUDE GOULASH, SPAGHETTI BOLOGNESE AND CHILLI CON CARNE

CZECH POINT

The Prague-Zurich sleeper was resurrected after a five-year hiatus in December 2022. The new 'Canopus' service has modern rolling stock with wi-fi and sleek couchettes

GERMAN LINK

On 25 May, the European Sleeper will run its first service between Brussels and Berlin, with direct connections from the UK with Eurostar

BALKAN BOUND

Launched in 2022, the EuroNight sleeper runs from Stuttgart, Germany via Austria, Italy and Slovenia to Zagreb in Croatia, where you can pick up connections to the coast

Sources: belmond.com europeansleeper.eu houseofswitzerland.org nightjet.com praguemorning.cz sj.se sleeper.scot

IMAGES: GETTY. WORDS: MATTHEW FIGG

HOT TOPIC

ACCESSIBLE AIR TRAVEL

A new campaign is seeking to improve air travel for passengers with disabilities by calling for change throughout the industry

Since travel restarted post-pandemic, one theme has emerged amid the overall chaos: travellers with disabilities being let down by airports and airlines. From special assistance passengers left on planes for upwards of an hour at the end of a flight to wheelchairs damaged in transit, there's been headline after headline in the past 18 months.

Now, it seems, things have reached crisis point. After her wheelchair was broken on a British Airways flight in February, TV presenter Sophie Morgan has launched a campaign with Disability Rights UK. Called Rights on Flights, its goal is to improve the airline experience for all passengers with disabilities.

Why now? "The majority of the time when I fly, something bad happens," says Morgan. "I've normalised the experience of something going wrong." After her wheelchair was damaged, she decided to take action. "It was on the back of other stories over the last six months – I thought, it's getting out of hand." She has high hopes that change can be brought about. "The industry is recognising its systems aren't working. Solutions need to be expedited." In the short term, Rights on Flights is asking parliament to enable the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to fine providers who fail passengers with disabilities. In the long term, it aims to equalise the airline experience for all travellers, from providing made-to-measure assistance to advocating for wheelchair spaces on planes.

Has the situation got worse or is it just better reported now? Roberto Castiglioni has been campaigning for better accessibility in aviation for the past 11 years as director of Reduced Mobility Rights. For him, the pandemic – which devastated the aviation industry – has had knock-on effects on special assistance. "Service levels have dropped significantly since the pandemic – the aviation industry is still struggling to catch up, with demand growing faster than expected," he says. In other words, everyone's suffering due to staffing levels, but what is an inconvenience for many can ruin a disabled person's trip.

Does this only affect wheelchair users? No. According to the 2021 census, 17.8 million people in the UK have some kind of disability, and many require help while travelling. That might mean taking someone with mobility issues to the gate, showing a blind person onto the plane, or allowing someone with sensory issues to pre-board. Yet many passengers are simply put in a wheelchair and taken to the gate, whether or not that assistance is useful. It's a sign of an outdated system. "At a time when even fast-food chains allow people to customise their food, disabled people are still unable to customise their airport journey," says Castiglioni.

Why are so many wheelchairs getting broken in transit? One major issue is aircraft design. No passenger airlines have planes in their fleets that have space for a wheelchair on board – even those jets that have recently been redesigned or refitted. Chairs go in the hold, and are often mishandled. "Handlers see them as cargo, not as someone's legs," says Castiglioni.

Morgan is calling for legislation to ensure that future aircraft be fully accessible, with space to keep chairs on board and better designed toilets. Currently, wheelchair users have to ask crew to take them to the toilet in uncomfortable, undersized 'aisle chairs' that most (but not all) planes have on board, then use the toilet with the door open.

Have any countries got it right? It's better in the US, where each airline is responsible for providing special assistance – in the UK and Europe, the airport handles it, meaning there's little accountability.

Should the CAA fine airports for assisted travel breaches? Morgan is calling for fines if airports "break equipment, don't provide the right assistance or leave us on board too long".

Of course, not only travellers with disabilities use special assistance at airports. Anyone who can't cope with long lines at security, getting up the steps to the plane or walking the long distances at major airports can book it – from elderly to pregnant to injured passengers. With the system under strain, and airlines passing the buck when things go wrong, perhaps change will only come when the CAA gets enforcement powers.

JULIA BUCKLEY

HOTELS

CAN HOTELS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

FROM RENEWABLE ENERGY AND CONSERVATION SCHEMES TO SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES AND MANAGING FOOD WASTE, THERE ARE MANY WAYS A HOTEL CAN MANAGE ITS FOOTPRINT. WORDS: FRANCISCA KELLETT

There are usually two camps when it comes to the signs found in hotel bathrooms — the ones that ask you to reuse your towels to 'help the environment'. The first — let's call them the cynics — think it's nothing more than a money-saving exercise and they'll use as many towels as they want. Then there are the others — the optimists? — who think, 'yeah, fair enough, I can use this more than once'.

Many of us are in the later camp, although we might question the the hotel's motives. Obviously, cutting back on laundry reduces a hotel's impact on the environment and does indeed save money — but that's not the issue. The issue is when hotels stop at that. Sign duly printed, virtue duly signalled, job done. But we, as consumers, know that doesn't cut it anymore. Not when hotels contribute to 1% of global carbon emissions, according to a WTO report.

As more people become more clued up about what sustainability means, the demand for environmentally friendly accommodation is on the rise. A global report by Booking.com in 2022 showed that 78% of respondents were planning to stay in a sustainable property this year. So far, so positive — but if only it were that simple. The same report said 31% of respondents didn't even know that sustainable accommodation is an option, while 29% didn't know how to find sustainable hotels.

So assuming you do know it's an option, how do you find it? How do you choose a hotel that's striving to protect its environment and benefit the local community? How do you spot the do-gooders from the greenwashers?

The best place to start is by asking questions and doing some digging. See if a hotel has a sustainability policy on its website, but check for specifics. Greenwashing is real, even if the EU recently introduced new measures to prevent companies from making unfounded claims. Some things to look out for include the mention of science-backed targets to reduce energy, carbon, water and waste, and details on how they involve and support the local community. If they're taking measurable action on these points, you're onto a winner. If they publish a thorough annual sustainability report, then so much the better.

Short on time? That's where certification comes in. This is where an independent body audits a property and gives it a stamp of approval which in turn lets travellers know it's genuinely sustainable. "Certification helps travellers to know a property isn't greenwashing, and provides experiences with positive impacts and a lower carbon footprint," explains Alex Poortier, the founder of the It Must Be Now alliance (NOW), a robust industry body that works with auditors at EarthCheck to certify hotels.

For Pride of Britain Hotels, working with NOW is a vital part of proving that its hotels really are striving to become more sustainable. "We need to ensure we can clearly evidence our own work," explains Kalindi Juneja, CEO of the group. "We recognise that we could lose our credibility in the marketplace in the future if we fail to take action ourselves." It's a question of keeping up, in other words, with a changing industry where hotels are expected to do more.

A question of trust

The problem with certification, though, is which ones to trust? There are dozens, from EarthCheck and Green Globe to LEED and Green Key. How do we know that a particular green stamp isn't greenwashing?

"The myriad of certifications makes it difficult for customers to know which ones to trust," explains Andrew Dixon, the owner of Nikoi Island in Indonesia. While it's a good rule of thumb that those approved by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) will be doing the right thing, most travellers won't know — or have the time or inclination — to find out.

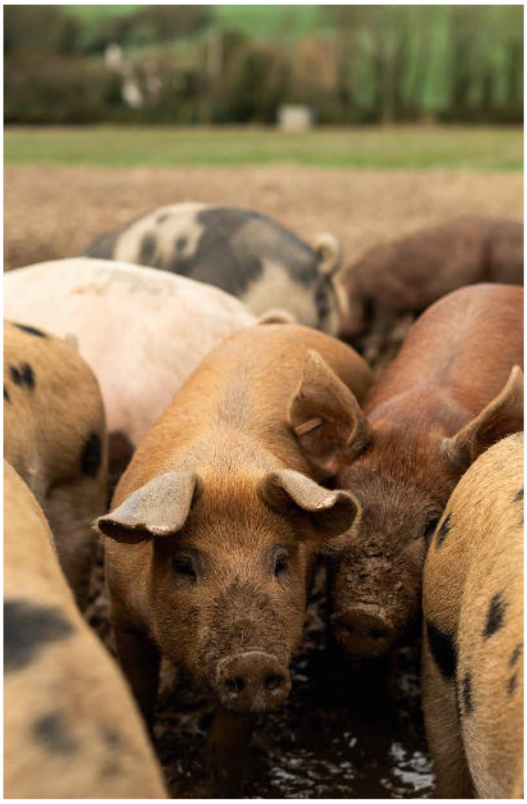
"I have mixed views about certification," says Dixon. "I see it as being more important for helping improve operations from an internal perspective. When done well, [certification] enables hotels to identify weaknesses and improve efficiencies." Nikoi has done just that, becoming one of just 10 Global Ecosphere Retreats in the world, the highest rating awarded by umbrella group The Long Run.

The Long Run itself, a 40-strong group of resorts and lodges, is as much about conservation as it is about offering incredible experiences in wild locations. Together, they protect 23 million acres of biodiversity and, through employment and community involvement, work to improve the lives of 750,000 people.

What these places all have in common is size. Small generally means more sustainable, for the simple reason that smaller hotels tend to have more power over their supply chains. "Staying in small, independent hotels goes hand in hand with travelling sustainably," says Daniel Luddington, VP of development at Small Luxury Hotels (SLH).

In 2021, SLH launched the Considerate Collection, 'making it easier for customers and the travel trade to make better-considered choices'. Now numbering 46, hotels are chosen for their strong alignment with the GSTC's framework. One example is Ballymaloe House Hotel in Ireland, which runs an annual tree-planting plan and designates much of its 300 acres of land for

IMAGE: NIKOI ISLAND



CHECKLIST

What makes an eco-hotel?

ENERGY

If the TV and AC are on full blast when you arrive, tell the front desk. And look out for initiatives like renewable energy usage and thermal heat pumps.

WATER WASTAGE

Ask if your accommodation reuses its grey water, and check to see if shower heads are low-flow. Turn down rooms with private plunge pools in dry climates.

FOOD WASTE

The second biggest contributor to a trip's carbon footprint. Say no to wasteful buffets and ask what happens to leftovers.

PLASTICS

Single-use plastics might be being outlawed in many European countries, but they continue to appear in hotels. Bring along your own bathroom goodies. If a hotel boasts that it's plastic-free, ask if that includes in the kitchen, too.

THINK LOCAL

Does the hotel employ local staff, fund local philanthropic initiatives or focus on local procurement?

rewilding. Another is zero-waste Forestis, a stylish bolthole in the Dolomites running on 100% renewable energy and that has an on-site organic garden.

While measuring energy usage and reducing carbon are obvious big ticks, another red flag is food waste, the second largest contributor to a trip's carbon footprint, after transport. If a hotel has huge, help-yourself buffets, for example, then you can be sure a big chunk of that food is ending up in the bin. Some hotels measure what guests send back on their plates to get to grips with their food waste.

Family-owned Red Carnation Hotels, for example, uses Winnow technology to identify its biggest culprits, such as vegetable trimmings — those little cherry tomatoes next to your scrambled eggs. Each property is working towards a set of targets; across 11 hotels, they've so far reduced food waste by 34.7 tons, a saving of 149.2 tons of CO2, and a cost saving of $91,621 (£76,500). Saving waste, much like saving energy or water, saves money.

What you eat is, of course, just as important as what you send back. CERVO Mountain Resort in Zermatt, for instance, has introduced a meat tax on its menus. Recognising that meat carries a higher carbon footprint than plant-based dishes, everything with meat on the menu has an additional 1 CHF (£0.90) added to it, which is then donated to climate projects at MyClimate.org.

It's worth noting while many of the large hotel brands are jumping on the sustainability bandwagon, big doesn't necessarily mean bad. "Every large hotel group is working hard on energy reduction," explains Xavier Font, professor of sustainability marketing at the University of Surrey.

Spain's largest hotel chain, Meliá Hotels, for example, has used scientific targets to save over $1.7m (£1.4m) in energy, as well as reducing its drinking water consumption by nearly half a billion litres in the last decade. Marriott, the world's largest hotel company with more than 7,500 hotels, is working with EarthCheck to reduce its environmental impact while also investing in modular construction for its new-builds — which means a reduction in energy consumption and a big drop in construction waste. This might sound like a detail too far for your average traveller, but when you consider construction contributes to 39% of global carbon emissions, it can't be dismissed. Hilton is dipping its toe, too: Brooklyn Motto Hotel is its first modular hotel, while hipster brand Habitas has been using modular construction since the get go.

At the very top of the scale, each property in the luxurious Six Senses brand monitors its environmental efforts, contributing to Cornell University's Hotel Sustainability Benchmarking Index. The most interesting project is Six Senses Svart, an architectural marvel in Norway's Holandsfjorden opening in 2024, and promising to be the first energy-positive hotel in the world

To be fair, it seems simple enough to find eco hotels at the luxury end that can afford to invest in certification, for example. But what about budget and mid-range hotels?

Above from left: Pigs at Ballymaloe House Hotel's farm, Cork; salad using ingredients from the on-site organic garden, Forestis, Italy; CERVO Mountain Resort, Switzerland, which has introduced a meat tax

Previous pages: Nikoi Island, Indonesia, a Global EcosphereResort

"The biggest change [in the hotel industry] has been that Booking.com, Google and Expedia have introduced programmes that are customer-facing," explains Font. "Before that, we had a handful of certification programmes that certified around 10,000 properties around the world. That number hadn't changed in 15 years." Using consistent, scientific data, these competitors are now working together under the non-profit Travalyst umbrella to bring sustainability information right under their customers' noses, with simple badges that highlight if a property is sustainable.

This has pushed up that number to 400,000, says Font, within a pool of 1.3 million properties featured on the websites. "This means there's now a critical mass of properties that are doing good stuff. Until now, they've been keeping quiet." By providing customers with transparent information on booking sites they already know, Travalyst has, in effect, brought sustainability into the mainstream.

Community involvement might be harder to measure than carbon, water or food, but it's no less important. As Glenn Fogel, CEO of Booking.com, said in a recent report from the brand: "Protecting the natural environment isn't the whole story; we must also consider the social, economic and cultural impact." It's something we all want to do more of, too. And according to an American Express poll in 2020, 72% of travellers want to help boost tourism revenue in local economies.

Asking questions

Community-based tourism is one way of ensuring your tourism dollars are going in the right direction, but so is asking questions and being alert to where you're staying. Does your hotel employ locally, and at all levels including management? Is food locally sourced, rather than flown in, thereby supporting local farmers? Does the gift shop showcase local artisans or stock cheap imports? These might seem like small matters, but together they can have a big impact.

So what's next in the world of sustainable hotels? Mostly, it's about transparency, accountability and language. As the term 'sustainable' becomes mainstream, there's a risk that it's also becoming ubiquitous. Newer terms, such as 'regenerative' or 'purposeful', are becoming more widespread, while 'greenhushing' — when businesses are reluctant to talk about their sustainable initiatives for fear of getting it wrong — is gaining traction.

The main thing, though, is that sustainability has to go together with a good customer experience, too. Thankfully, this is often the case. As Michael Lutzeyer, owner of Grootbos Private Nature Reserve in South Africa, explains: "We've always operated following the '4Cs': conservation, community, culture and commerce. It's a model that shows it's possible to honour our incredible nature and communities, and integrate this into the guest experience to make each stay unforgettable."

Xavier Font agrees. "Consumers want to be sustainable. But no one goes on holiday to feel worthy." In other words, we travel to have a good time, not to change the world. But isn't it important to know your travels could have a positive impact? ▮

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IMAGES: BALLYMALOE HOUSE; FORESTIS; CERVO MOUNTAIN RESORT

TRINIDAD

Wild island excursions

From nesting turtles to volcanic mud baths, this Caribbean island is teeming with natural adventures. Words: Jen Ruiz

1 WALK ON WATER

La Brea Pitch Lake is the world's largest natural deposit of asphalt, rich with sulphur and highly sought after for its healing properties — it's often referred to as the eighth Wonder of the World. The lake is filled with dark clay that hisses and burps, and in some places has a consistency that allows you to walk across water. Bask in the natural pools and look out for the bountiful birdlife, from herons to hummingbirds.

2 GO ISLAND HOPPING

Escape on a boat ride to Nelson Island, an important historical site and the largest of Trinidad's 'Five islands', to discover its rich colonial history, wildlife and flora. Gaspar Grande is another nearby island that enables you to trek into the Gasparee Caves, located 100ft underground. Here, visitors can see natural sinkholes and crystal salt pools with dappled sunlight.

3 WITNESS NESTING TURTLES

Trinidad is the second largest leatherback turtle nesting site in the world and, from March to August, you can witness their nocturnal activity, laying hundreds of eggs in the hope that a handful will survive. The most popular beaches for viewing this natural phenomenon include Matura, Grande Riviere and Fishing Pond. All visitors must be accompanied by a guide.

4 KAYAK THROUGH A MANGROVE

The Caroni Swamp is a bird sanctuary filled with mangroves, marshes and lagoons. A kayak tour here takes about three hours and can be done first thing in the morning or just in time for sunset. You're almost guaranteed to see storks and flamingos during your trip, but the image that visitors eagerly await to photograph is the sight of a scarlet ibis returning to roost.

5 SOAK IN A VOLCANIC MUD BATH

Try a mud bath with a twist at L'eau Michel Mud Volcano. Located in southern Trinidad, this secluded natural pool can be reached after a 20-minute hike through an abandoned sugar cane plantation. Despite being on a volcano, the mud is cool to the touch and so dense that you'll automatically float. Allow your skin to absorb the minerals as you hike to L'eau Michel Beach, where you'll wash it all off in the ocean water.

Clockwise from above: Gasparee Island; a leatherback turtle on Matura Beach

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Direct flights from London to Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain, take little over nine hours and are offered by carriers including British Airways. *visittrinidad.tt*

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IMAGE: GETTY

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SALENTO

Culture & cuisine

The charms of southern Italy are at their best in Salento, where communities bustle in alley-woven villages and olive groves stretch into the horizon. Words: Kerry Walker

From left: the harbour and old town of Brindisi; a plate of octopus legs with greens and olive oil drizzled on the side; Apulian olives from Salento

LECCE

Often hailed the Florence of the South — albeit with fewer crowds — Lecce is a riot of palazzi, domes and churches, all intricately hewn from golden limestone. The village, which has been put forward for UNESCO World Heritage status, is known for its 16th- and 17th-century sites, constructed in the flamboyant Leccese baroque style, such as the cathedral-topped Piazza del Duomo and the Basilica di Santa Croce. The latter is decorated with mythological beasts, cherubs and naturalistic detail swirling across its honeyed facade. For romance, explore the city in the blue of dusk, when this architectural ensemble glows gold.

The city is the ideal base for exploring the Salento region, as it's located between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, meaning you can reach all the peninsula's sights within an hour. The surrounding area is punctuated with family-run *agriturismi* (farmstays) and ancient, warm-stone villages like Caprarica di Lecce. Here, community projects have invested in revamping former olive mills, transforming them into houses and community hubs to preserve their history.

BRINDISI

The lure of the sea is omnipresent in the often-overlooked port of Brindisi, with its cinematic Adriatic light, palm-fringed seafront and ferries chugging to Greek shores. The city pulses with history: traders, crusaders and soldiers once traipsed along its Via Appia, an ancient route linking the city to Rome. Look out for the 58ft-tall Roman column that marks its terminus. For a deeper dive into Brindisi's history, the archaeological museum on Piazza del Duomo spells out the past in artefacts, from Hellenistic bronze sculptures to impressive underwater finds, including the valuable cargo of an ancient shipwreck.

The town is also a renowned culinary hotspot. Visit one of its many trattorias to dig into local favourites like *orecchiette alle cime di rapa* (pasta with turnip tops), *rustici* (pastries filled with cheese, tomatoes and spinach) and fresh seafood drizzled in extra-virgin olive oil. And if you like the olive oil, Olivami, a company supporting farmers in a bid to reforest the olive groves of Salento in a sustainable way, has a scheme where you can adopt a tree.

MORE INFO

Discover Italy's lesser-known villages with London-based ITS ITALY, which aims to simplify the process of buying and managing property abroad. Having signed a partnership with more than 60 municipalities, it offers opportunities to invest and integrate with local communities. For more, visit *itsfor.it*

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Deal seafront in Kent, viewed from the town's pier

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Gel-Trabuco 11 shoes by Asics worth £145!

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IMAGE: RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR

STAR LETTER

Homecoming

I've loved my subscription to this fantastic publication for several years. I recently gave my 90-year-old mother a gift subscription — and I'm delighted that she's also loving it. She's travelled extensively — starting in the 1950s when she bravely moved to Lagos for 18 months — and was my inspiration to experience the world. Having said that, your recent article about Deal, Dover and Folkestone (Kent, October 2022) was fantastic. I grew up in Dover but, having moved away, I was interested in the amazing transformation that Folkestone has undergone. I visited last month with my mother and we both loved it. That sums up the magazine. **DAVE WOULDHAM**

Around the world at 40 degrees

Your interview with Paul Pritchard (Meet the Adventurer, *The Alps Summer Guide 2023*) leapt off the page at me. I found his story passionate and compelling, humbling and inspiring. But it was Paul's almost throwaway comment at the very end that really got me thinking. He contemplates travelling across Australia along the Tropic of Capricorn and it made me wonder what a round-the-world trip along a singular degree of latitude would look like. I was amazed at how diverse a journey along 40 degrees north would be. Hopefully, with a bit of planning, I'll get a chance to experience it in the coming years. **GORDON ROBERTSON**

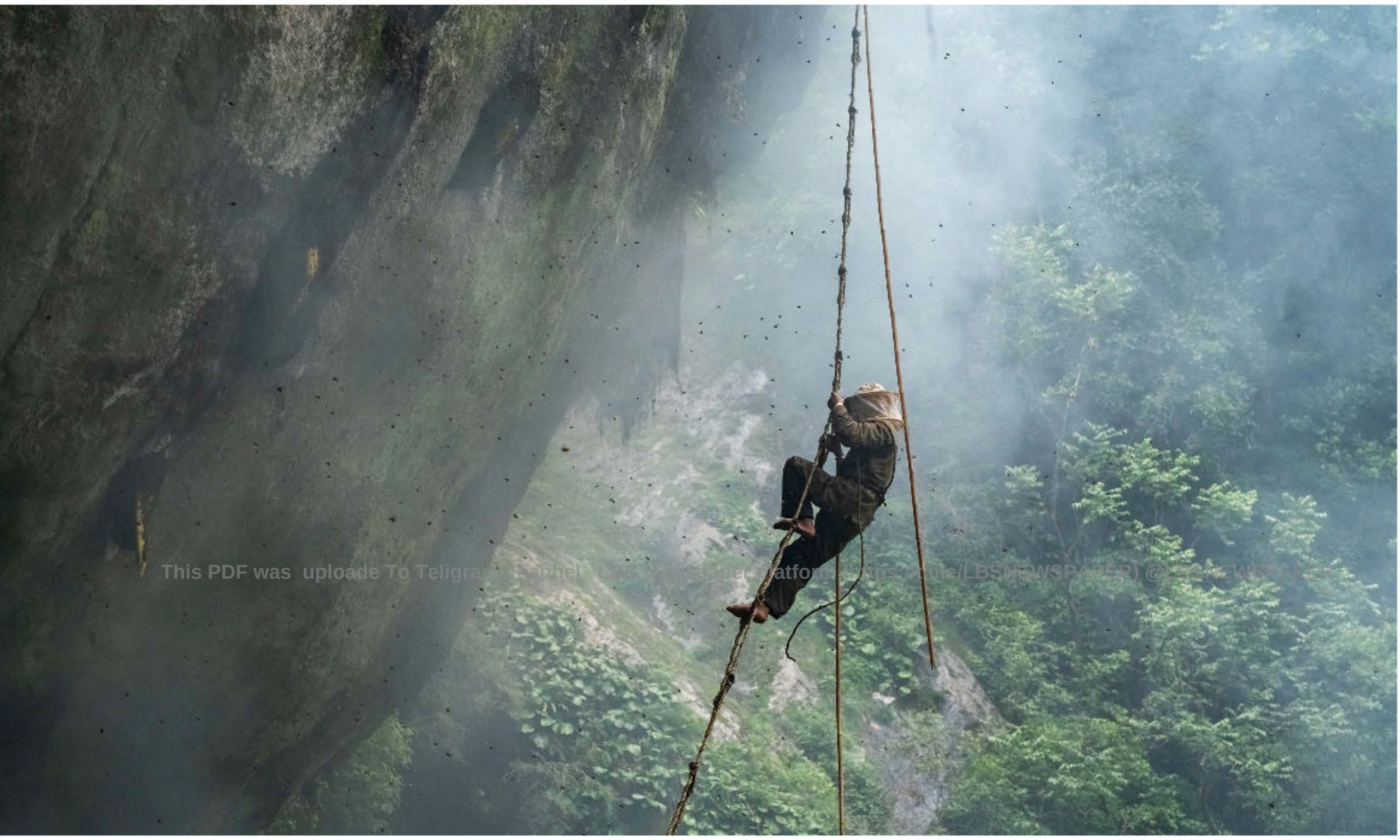
Ticket to paradise

The romantic and beautiful islands of French Polynesia are indeed enticing (March 2023). I'm a guest lecturer from Aotearoa, New Zealand on a working freighter, the *Aranui 5*, which sails every few weeks from Papeete to the Marquesas. Each voyage is unique; passengers interact with the local crew while the ship delivers essential cargo to remote villages. In return, it picks up copra (dried coconut) to be processed in Papeete, as well as fresh produce. It's a great trip for anyone with a sense of discovery to understand the warmth of Polynesian hospitality. **VICTORIA ANDREWS**

NEPAL

HOW I GOT THE SHOT

DIKPAL THAPA TREKKED TO A CLIFF EDGE, WITH NO PROTECTIVE GEAR AND SURROUNDED BY THE WORLD'S LARGEST HONEYBEES, TO CAPTURE THIS IMAGE, FEATURED IN OUR APRIL 2023 ISSUE



Tell us about this image.
This shot was taken near the remote village of Bhujung in Nepal's Lamjung district. Here, the Gurung community have been harvesting honey for centuries, trekking deep into the forest to collect the sticky delicacy from wild Himalayan bees. In this image, a honey hunter is seen coming down from a clifftop, bare-footed and with no protective gear; every tool used for the harvest is handcrafted with local resources.

What sparked your interest in this assignment?
This local tradition was first captured by French photographer Eric Valli in 1988, and those shots have stayed with me ever since I first laid eyes on them as a child. The bold and gripping images, which encapsulated a corner of my country, fascinated me entirely, stirring in me a strong desire to witness the event myself.

How did you achieve the shot?
I used my Nikon D810 camera and Sigma 50mm Art F1.4 lens. I always travel with three lenses, which I rely on equally depending on the situation: 24-70 and 70-200 f2.8 for their versatility, and 50mm f1.4 for portraits. Most of the time, I end up using the 24-70 or 70-200. But here, to capture the details of the bees buzzing around and the motion of the honey hunter, I opted for the fast and crisp Sigma 50mm.

What were the challenges at play?
I had to trek for a day into the Nepalese wilderness with the party of hunters. The harvest site is hard to get to, at the edge of a cliff. To get a clear shot, I had to reach it without any proper protective gear myself, risking my life. A fire is lit to smoke the bees out of their hives, and while the insects aren't harmed, they turn on whoever is nearby in retaliation. I got stung multiple times and ended up with a swollen eye. Due to the smoke and swarm of aggressive bees, I could only take my camera out occasionally, but I made the best of it.

What advice would you give to someone starting out in travel photography?
Travel for yourself, even when you're on assignment. Travel photography is all about presenting what you see and what you experience. So, go above and beyond an assignment's needs and take as much as you can from that place. You might visit it again, but you can't go back to that particular moment.

View the full shoot and interview online at nationalgeographic.com/travel
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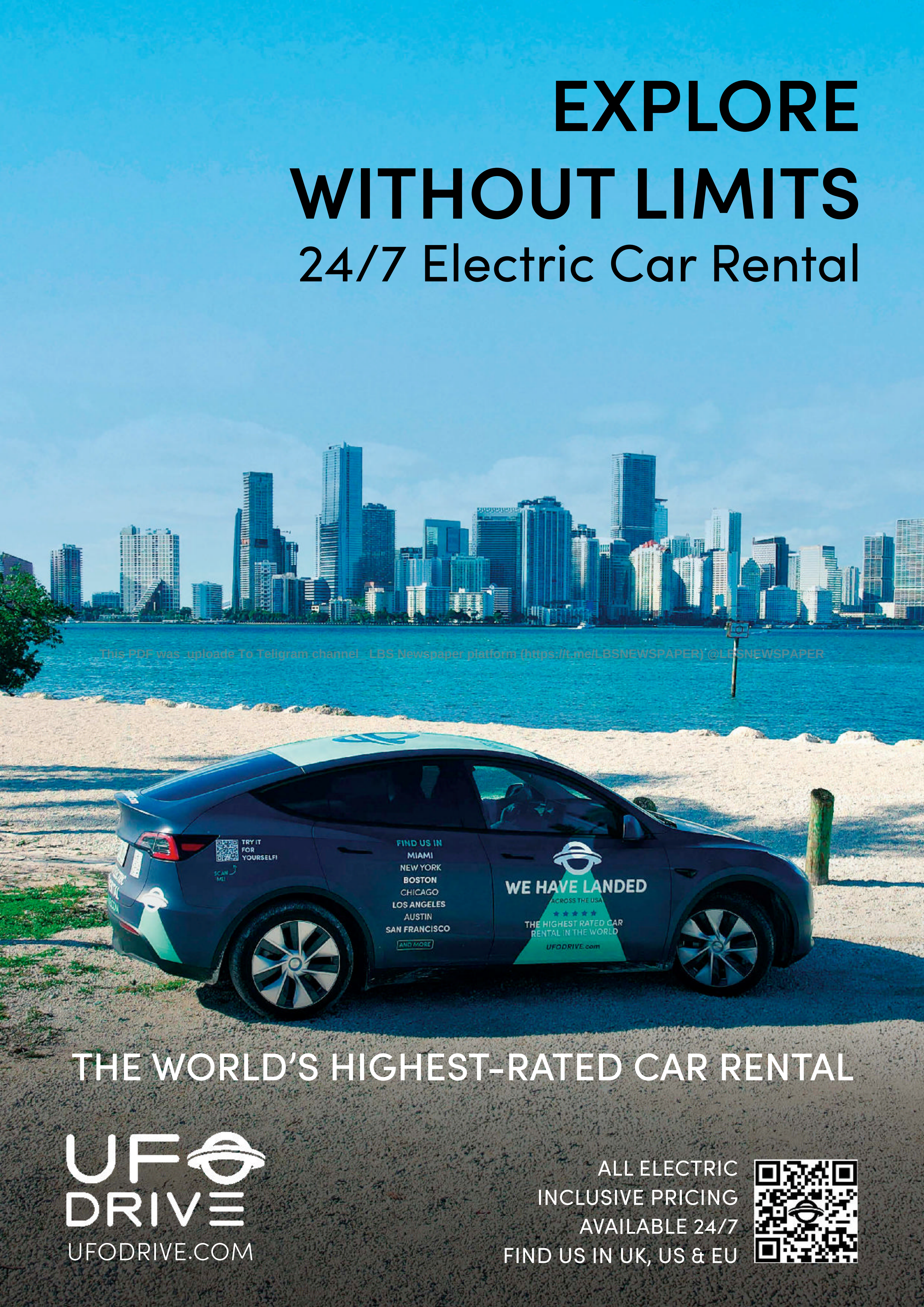

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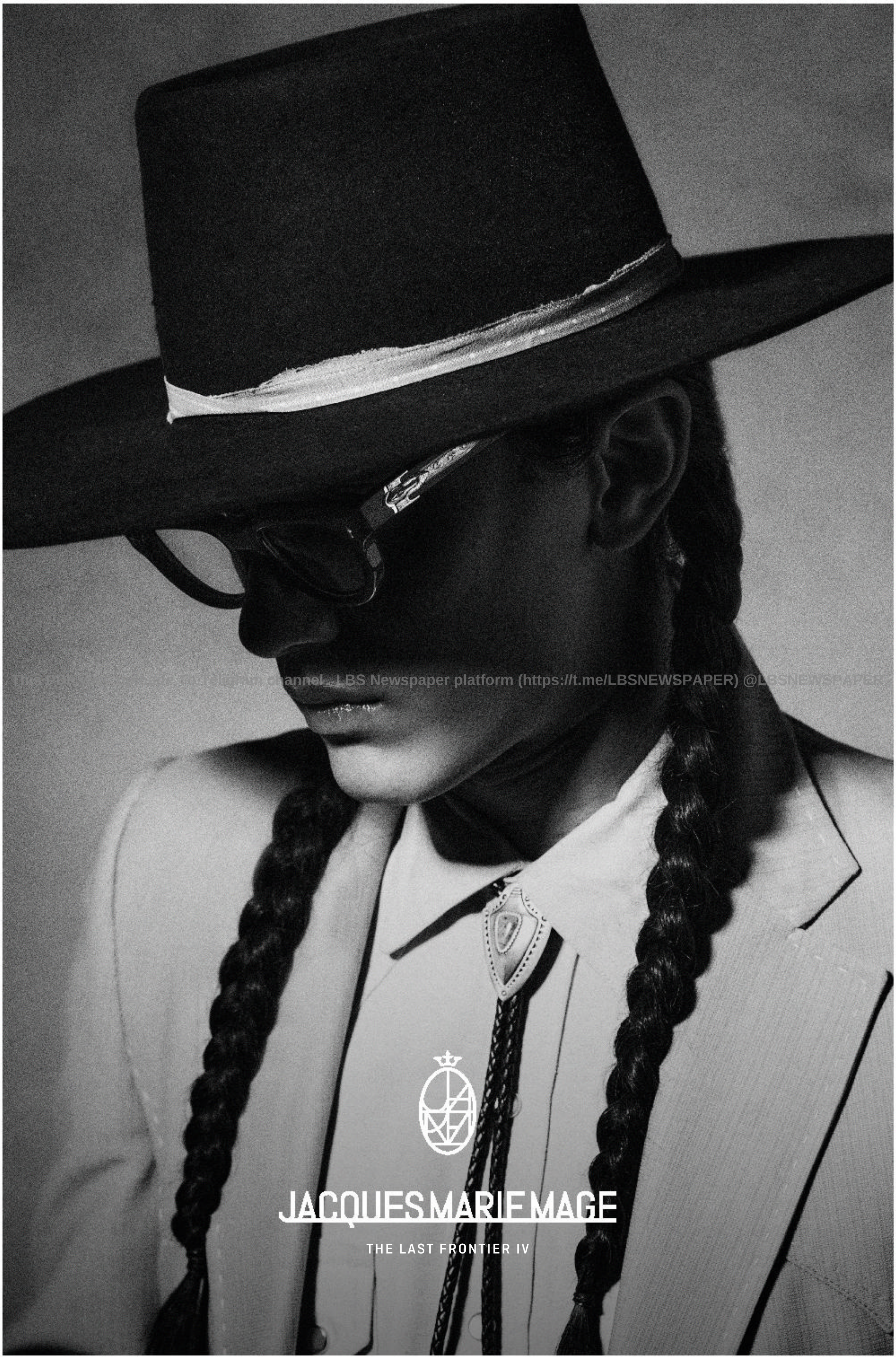
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